

# The Space Between Dreams

a novel  
by

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(a.k.a. K'an)

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This story is dedicated to your free and insubordinate will;

which has no price,  
cannot be sold or sold out,  
and is always getting you unjustly punished  
for asking inappropriate questions,  
creating inappropriate art,  
and telling inappropriate truth.

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Create, Evolve, Disobey

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## Chapter Zero

Dreams have no beginning; no end...

**Awake, and naked, and alone. Denatured by some recent and mysterious intemperance; left with literally nothing but a searing chemical hangover. Nauseous and prostrate atop a hundred foot igneous erection protruding from the South Pacific. Surrounded by a flat infinity of water, except for one hazy grayish speck on the horizon. Trying in vain to reconstruct some fractured rhyme or folk song or poem, repeating that one line over and over and over in the mind obsessively... something about a spider trapped in an hourglass.**

...you already know how this ends

This is Howard's first memory. He is eighteen years old. He has absolutely no idea who he was before this moment. He simply woke up into the world *tabula rasa* like this; burning and clutching at some lost fragment of rhyme. After a few thousand mental repetitions, individual words like *hourglass* lose their meaning, and in his dehydrated delirium, he believes his name to be Howard Glass. Free from any attachments, he clings

to this Howard Glass identity as a metaphysical foothold. He begins making binary distinctions, constructing a functional level of sanity for himself; evoking pattern from the random spacetime that engulfs him.

And the struggle to understand that which understands itself becomes Howard.

He knows he can't climb down... he will probably die if he jumps... he will certainly dehydrate if he waits... More than anything, he realizes that he wants to feel the cool water, at least before he dies, and this desire becomes the one deciding factor to act. He crawls up to the ledge, focuses his mind in fierce defiance of all his survival instincts, closes his eyes and rolls off, plummeting headlong into a spontaneous, all-nullifying SNAP.

He swims to an empty and featureless place where even time has no jurisdiction, and there he meets Death. Again. Death tells him the next time they meet, his return to this place will trigger an apocalypse in America's mind. He will die strangely, painfully, probably murdered...

"Enough, I don't want to hear any more. I'd rather not follow along with the inevitable details of my horrific death as they unfold, and besides, if this place... this *sensory deprivation environment* you call an 'afterlife' is all I have to look forward to after at least two near-death experiences and one painful murder, you can stick this nondescript infinity up your nondescript ass."

Death smiles and tells him not to worry; this is a special, intermediate place safe for his consciousness to experience without permanently dying. Then his body coughs up two lungfuls of warm brine and he's having a seizure on a beach at night; choking and overstimulated by all the agonies of resurrection.

There were no witnesses.

He just dealt with it, patiently controlling panic until he could breathe normally. He got up like an unkillable villain and dragged his bright red blistering ass through a small jungle, past rusted and vine-entangled warplane skeletons crashed in some ancient war, and finally making his way into the open terrace of a small beach resort. He submerged his whole head in a blue tile fountain and started choking down its cloudy, chlorinated water. The grayish speck turned out to be the Solomon Islands.

Mindlessly gulping the warm pissy fountain water of life, he felt a hand grasp and carefully squeeze his skull with a grip that could gently flatten railroad track. A short, bald, stocky man pulled him from the fountain. He was about five foot naught, Asian, and sporting a shaven head and massive tattooed Popeye forearms. He wore a loose gray hooded sweatshirt, loose-fitting drawstring pants, and no shoes... the man was a little powerhouse, built for jujitsu or judo, with a radiant aura of total, relaxed confidence that advertised his mastery of such an art.

"Don't drink that," he smiled, "you'll shit your intestines. Come with me, let's go get some dinner, my treat." His voice, or maybe his posture, somehow commanded calm, friendly obedience. "You like beer? Seafood? All you can eat. On me. Cmon."

Howard followed the man, whose name was Asano, into the resort, where Asano gave him a white hooded sweatshirt, pants, and sandals.

"White," Asano said, "usually represents focus on the mental sphere. Grey, like what I'm wearing, shows that I focus my training on spiritual energies. Black hoods are physical, like, you know, acrobats, ninjas and Wushu masters." Howard had no idea what

the fuck he was talking about, but at the prospect of free beer and seafood, he just smiled and nodded complacently. *Right... Mental sphere. Check. When do we eat?*

They ate dinner on a thatched veranda, watching refracted moonlight dance like weightless platinum blades on distant and fleeting wave-crests. They listened to its whispered roars and purrs between Asano's casual outbursts of metaphysics.

"So where are you from, Howard?" He snapped open a crab leg with his thumb.

Howard would never forget the smell of the ocean after tonight. "The ocean."

Asano laughed heartily at this, interpreting it as the Zen answer to a pointless question. "Gotcha. Let's talk about something else. Who are you?"

Howard replied, "Howard... uh, Glass, sorry. Howard Glass."

Asano immediately blew him off, interrupting him as soon as he said 'Howard.'

"No, I mean who are you?"

Howard thought, shrugged and cautiously pointed to himself.

Asano shook his head and smiled. "Better, but no. Okay, how about this... when you dream, how would you describe the first person character in those dreams?"

"I - I've never had any dreams. Well, none that I can remember, anyway." He closed his eyes and tried to empty his beer-clouded mind. Something came. He was... drowning... or no - travelling... but the *I* in that scene was a different person... waiting for... a ride that wasn't coming... he couldn't remember anything else. Suddenly it occurred to Howard that he didn't even know what he looked like, or even what colour his own eyes and hair were.

"Howard, would you agree that everything of which you are currently conscious IS you?"

“That means... *who I am* is changing into something different every moment?”

“Yep.”

“And if I’m conscious of you, and of your consciousness, and if you’re conscious of me, and of my consciousness at the same time, we... *share* consciousness?” Howard was suddenly terrified that Asano was inside his head somehow, snooping around. His consciousness instinctively contracted, tightened, narrowed, solidified and clung to fundamentals and mantras.

*Flawless and effective psychic self-defense reaction; as if the product of professional training.* Asano sensed something seriously wrong and changed the subject.

"Uhhh, okay, let's talk about free will instead. Do you like the idea of free will?"

Howard’s subconscious found the subject intimately familiar and opened up again. "Yeah. Of course." He tried to imitate Asano's crab leg maneuver, nearly spraining his thumb. He quickly resorted to cutlery.

"Me too. Actually, I can't handle the idea that I don't get to decide what I think and say and do. I mean I hate the idea of no free will, but I also can't disprove it." Asano growled in appreciation as he chewed the warm buttery crabmeat.

Howard was staring at his own alien reflection for the first time in the plate glass across from their table. *I don't recognize my own face. Weird. Dark, wiry, messy hair... dark circles under my eyes... some kind of sore on my neck...*

“Like, Howard, I mean, do you agree that nothing can happen unless the right conditions for it to happen are met?”

"?"

"Like, a tree isn't going to grow unless conditions like water and sunlight and nutrients and air are all in the right place at the right time, right?"

Howard nodded absently. "Right."

"So would you agree that this applies to every event, every happening?"

He stopped gawking at himself and thought about it. "Sure ... yes. Definitely."

Asano clapped his hands together for emphasis, startling Howard. "Now, when you decide to do something, why should that be any different?"

"I'm sorry. I think I'm a little brain damaged or something. I'm not following you... what?" He licked some garlic butter from his fingertips and snatched up a succulent pink butterfly shrimp, devouring it in one fluid motion.

Asano smiled again, languidly trying to shake the Piña Colada foam from the plastic cup into his mouth. "Why did you eat that shrimp?"

"I was hungry."

"Sure. But did you decide to eat it?"

"Mm-hmm, yeah."

"No you didn't decide. See, the conditions were right for you eating shrimp: you were hungry, it smelled good, edible, nontoxic, it was in front of you, the butter on your fingers reminded you of them, there were no repercussions for eating it, you didn't sense that I would try to stop you. So you just grabbed it and ate it. Or rather, your spinal nerves and lower brain did almost all of the work. You only **think** you *decided* to eat."

"I see what you're getting at ..."

"It's really easy to see when its basic functions - drinking, shitting, breathing, sleeping. But when you really apply this idea, really see how deeply it can go - it goes all



the way. Right down to reading one book instead of another, ordering fish instead of steak, what kind of pen you prefer to write with, what TV shows you watch ... none of these things are voluntary. You don't choose to do any of it. You do everything for a specific reason. Cause and effect."

"I don't think I'm liking this idea of yours. ..."

"Neither do I. I hate it. But, in all my intelligence and reason, I can't argue against it. I once tried to disprove it by doing completely irrational things like setting a chair on fire and throwing it through the window of my house, or walking to work, turning, and walking in the opposite direction for three hours. But then I realized -"

"You were just doing that to disprove the idea."

"Exactly. The specific reason - to disprove the idea - was the cause of my 'irrational' act; which turned out to be perfectly rational. You can't act irrationally. It's impossible. Even if you're the craziest motherfucker on Earth, all of your behavior has specific causes that aren't you or your so-called 'free will'."

"What if I was hungry, so I put on some lipstick and kicked a dog?"

"Yeah I thought of that. Yes, that would be irrational, but it would *never* happen. Nobody would kick a dog because they were hungry unless maybe they were angry about being hungry, or if they planned on kicking it to death and eating it. But those are cause-effect. There can be no irrational effects. So you just naturally wouldn't do that."

"We're talking determinism..."

"Yes, I'm getting to that. But linger on the free will for a moment. You fool yourself every time you do anything, into thinking that you chose to do it. You just ate

shrimp. Did you decide to eat it? Maybe. Did you decide to decide to eat it? Hell no. You just did it, because you were hungry and you thought it would taste good."

"Right."

"And so that shrimp died to prove that, just like you said, the universe is deterministic: the most complicated chain of dominos you can possibly imagine. You know what two problems with determinism are?"

"Fate?" Howard pushed the lime wedge down into his beer bottle.

"Yeah, fate's one. Nobody likes fate. Well, okay romantics like fate but I don't think they understand it. But I mean what's an even bigger problem, the one that fate leads to?"

"I don't know."

"Responsibility. Morality. If I don't choose what I do, I mean, if every single action of mine is caused by the external conditions leading to it, then it's not just that I have no free will, but hell, I'm not even responsible for anything that I do."

"Shit." Howard's brain cracked, a little.

"Yeah." They both sat in silence for a few moments.

"And if I didn't choose to commit a crime, I don't deserve to be punished for it," Asano added.

"But then again, they're not choosing to punish you ..."

"True. True I never thought of that." Asano was impressed.

"So, you tried to disprove the idea. Why?"

"Because it sucks."

"Right. You had a feeling that it was wrong."

"Right."

"So why would a deterministic universe that is 100% rational cause you to doubt it? See what I'm saying?" Howard grinned.

"Yes! Howard, you're a genius." This made Howard feel pretty great for a guy who didn't even know who he was.

"Maybe there's a deterministic order to the universe, but there's also a you who exists *somehow* outside those rules. A you who can feel the truth, even if it's the opposite of flawless reasoning. A you who owns a will that can influence how cause-effect happens around you."

"Right, right," Asano smiled.

"So what is that feeling? Where does it come from? I mean, maybe you're right; maybe there is no free will by that definition, and maybe there's a causal force that's beyond our control that maps out whatever happens to us... but I still have this feeling inside me that tells me that even though I may not be in control of my life, I can certainly make it as interesting and unique as possible." Howard spoke passionately about this, which felt incredibly odd to him, since the beer was allowing the self he couldn't remember to do all the talking for him. Howard didn't really even know what he was talking about. *Whatever it was* he was preaching felt like a mad righteous projectile vomit on the way out.

"I have that feeling too, Howard, but I'm not sure how to go about making a deterministic life interesting and original..."

Howard started to get a rushy feeling like a small part of his amnesia was unlocking. He gesticulated wildly and just let it flow, speaking without thinking. "By

inciting completely insane, complex, surreal, grandiose, fantastic dreams. Fantasies. Voluntary solitaire headgames. As many as your brain can harbor. As bizarre and as unreasonable as possible!" He inhaled a bit of beer as he was talking and choked, "See, I have this gut feeling that the predictability and repetitiveness of my life is directly proportional to the unpredictability and originality of my dreams, know what I mean? Harboring lots of crazy dreams will hopefully extend my radius and make life less predictable to *me*, even though it may be entirely predictable in terms of pure determinism. Who cares whether or not my behavior is predictable as long as **I** can't predict it? As long as *I'm* amused and surprised, that's really all that matters, right?" Howard still didn't really have a clue what he was talking about, but it sounded pretty interesting.

Asano was grinning lazily at all of this spewing out of a man born yesterday. A man from the ocean. *Time to pop the question*, he thought, but Howard was still waxing metaphysical, showing him up, even...

"...I mean, if this were all just some kind of game, then you'd at least have a responsibility to keep your player amused, right?" *Whoa... what did I mean by that? That sounds familiar.*

Asano started to grapple with Howard's cryptic statement, but then he remembered the question he was about to ask...

"Howard, I'm a sohei. A warrior-monk. I live in a martial arts training community called K'an Monastery. How would you like to come back with me to live and train there for a couple of years?"

Howard raised an eyebrow and just shrugged. Having just become aware in a foreign country with no ID, no memory and no money, sanctuary in a monastery sounded like a pretty sweet deal. "Well, I don't have any *other* plans at the moment. Sure."

"I should warn you though. It's not a traditional monastery. It's not religious, unless you consider yourself and the art that manages to escape you a religion."

"Cool." Howard looked around for more edible food.

"Basically, it's a place for people who want to self-evolve as much as possible, however they want to evolve, without being told how, and without having to worry about expenses like food and shelter. Traditional monasteries are like living at home with your parents... their roof, their food, their rules, right? We have rules too, but we don't restrict the course of your self-development unless it interferes with the development of other monks. We figure the average person would be ten times as self-evolved if he didn't spend the majority of his lifetime working to earn the 'privilege' of eating. We're a pirate education system, if you will."

"A pirate education system?"

Asano laughed. "Okay, look, you know what pirate broadcasting is, right?"

Howard squinted for a second, then nodded.

"Why does pirate broadcasting exist? Because mainstream broadcasting's pool gets pissed and shat in a thousand times a day by marketers, censors, censuses and corporate interests. Pirate broadcasting exists because these greedy corporate shit demons that stand between people and free speech have forced it to emerge as a necessary outlet."

Asano spoke righteously on this particular matter.

Howard chose not to interfere with the sermon.

“So K’an Monastery has been forced by conventional education to emerge... an education system uninfluenced by...” he started tipsily counting on his fingers for effect, “...government interests, corporate sponsorship, special interest groups, the freedom-abolishing doomsayings of the religious right, capitalism, family values, and so on. So we don’t actually call it a *pirate* education system, we call it ‘anti-canonical’ education. Our curricula are extremely rich in electives, and are mostly free from the influences of Judeo-Christian morality, consumerism...”

*Can't argue with that.* Howard cut him off. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. So rest up. It's a long trip." Asano finished up his seafood in surf-silence, wondering why he could notice non-symmetrical patterns, or *li*, in the moonlit waves.

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Howard spent most of his “first” three years in silence: meditating, training, reading, writing, studying and creating works of art in every medium he could master. For the first year, his day went something like: wake up, stretch, wash, eat, practice forms and slam his fists into a canvas bag full of sand until noon; then eat, read, go to classes, meditate, stretch, and spar with Asano and the other monks; then eat, read, study, then write, paint, draw or sculpt; then meditate and sleep. The second and third years were more or less exactly the same, except on the second year, the canvas bag was filled with river pebbles, and on the third year, it was filled with iron pellets that gradually formed a concave chunk of solid rust. The third year, all the blades and chains he trained with were live.

Every night in his cell, Howard would ask himself the same unanswerable questions that you ask yourself in that bizarre psychiatric waiting room of the unconscious. He mastered the four forms of meditation, which, combined, gifted him with the ability to sit serene and motionless with neither hydration nor sustenance while masterfully glean the exact same answers that you glean lying in bed with your bad insomniac self.

The meditation had come easily to Howard. He was a born natural, if such a thing can be said about meditation. He would picture a pool of clear water, which became his mind. As thoughts passed, they would fall like drops of ink into the pool, and he would watch the surface ripple and the ink diffuse; slowly coloring the water and thinning out into a uniform hue. After a while, the pool would be inky black and perfectly still. The longer the pool remained calm, the clearer it became. A thought would fall, making ripples with its gravity and staining the water dark. He patiently sat and watched, and the water would start to clear again once the rippling subsided. When the water was clear again, he would end his meditation. His only difficulty was in realizing that the pool had become clear, and that the clearness meant it was time to end the meditation - without letting another drop of ink fall into the pool by realizing as much. He solved this enigma in three short months. The solution cannot be reduced to expression by any existing language, and therefore, it cannot yet be conveyed to another human brain. This is a truth which can only be realized independently.

"Like the solutions to most koans and enigmas," Asano would always say, "the answers don't make sense if you just hear them out of context. You can only really figure

the questions out for yourself... and in the process of understanding those questions, you will acquire the context necessary to understand the answers."

It is written in Palmers of Light historical scripture that this individualistic variation on monastic life controlled Howard's latent schizophrenia during his post amnesiac re-formative years. Had his mental illness gone undisciplined, he might never have developed the delicate mental faculties necessary to become the unwitting messianic figurehead of a psychedelic religion.

But he did, and that's why there are gilded and illuminated volumes of sacred scripture, with his name on the cover, sitting on platinum altars and lapis-encrusted holy pedestals in the inner sanctums and libraries of mind-bending architecturally asymmetrical temples created out of pure thought.

It was prophesied by the Palmers of Light, who documented his existence, that Howard would one day see through the Veil and tear spacetime a new asshole. And without even realizing it.

All Howard knew was that his fate had something to do with that original conversation about free will... the first conversation he could remember, and one of the mere sixty or so spoken exchanges he would ever have in his life.



## Chapter One

The Information Age was the afterparty at which Shiva danced the *Anandatanava* like a wild orgasm on the decollated corpses of the dominators.

America came stumbling out of a sort of drunken, heavily armed psychotic masturbation episode into the harsh light of a new renaissance; all bleary-eyed, cracked out and cloyed; trying to remember the guiltiest of the foggy details. Whether you called it an age of freedom or chaos depended heavily on the polarities of your worldview, because truly, it was both. Once information had been full-nelsoned by marketers and other capitalists, most human experiences became, as a result, soul-crushingly predictable, cautious and routine. The human spirit took a stumble, but it discovered the true value of creativity while it was down. The focus was no longer on quarantining every observable phenomenon into a predictable and explicable field of containment... now the focus was pretty much entirely on coming up with something - anything *original*. The geeks inherited the Earth, artists with creative integrity ate well for the first time in human history, and everything from architecture to pop culture broke out of its own pragmatic chrysalis and thrived.

Take the Holy Trinity, for example: The Arms Responsibility Code of Honor, the *Palmer vs. Hendrickson* Supreme Court Case, and True Democracy by internet terminal. These are commonly accepted as the three most significant political acts of the dawn of the new renaissance..

The one major play that got Joe Denominator back into shape and stopped him from killing himself once every ten seconds was the Arms Responsibility Code of Honor, a.k.a. ARCH.

See, America had this big murder problem. Anyone could have a firearm if they wanted one, and so almost everyone did. As cool and cathartic as guns were when unwielded by psychotics (with or without badges,) the big problem was that you could be a lazy, asthmatic, three-hundred-fifty pound talkshow-addicted McGluteus with problems even getting up off the couch, but if you had a firearm, you could kill a lifelong thug *almost* as easily as he could kill you. This was widespread life or death point-and-click, and it meant that everyone was generally a lot fatter, stupider and lazier than they should have been, mostly due to lack of survival skills, and everyone relying on guns, (personal or tax-funded,) to keep them safe from every boogeyman on television.

Childless adults believed they needed guns to protect *the children* from everything, too. The official protection of these nonexistent *children* justified everything from state-sanctioned murder to text-messaged telewarrants delivered by automated justice of the peace servers, cheerfully approving up to seven black bag ops on a Friday night. The weak resolved all conflict by immediately appealing to a higher and more powerful authority: a hotshot lawyer or a firearm with decent stopping power... it devolved into a nation of weak, dishonest, greedy, bitter, litigious tattletales. Violent crime was at an all-time high per capita, considering it was so simple to steal, kill and rape on either side of the law when you had a gun. You needed about ten minutes of training to learn how to effectively kill with a pistol, and it required very little actual *guts* to use in a lethal fashion. Simple point-and-click. Opponent falls down; no worries.

However, most major urban areas at the time weren't so much peopled by the well-armed redneck couch slug as they were infested by the unfortunate walking dead of the IT industry. Wage slaves on corporate life support; one in seven with a lazy eye or a missing appendage; rapidly devolving but somehow retaining odd scraps of sanity with only three hours of free time per day to work with. Imagine only one-eighth of your life belonging to you. Imagine the remainder of your waking life reduced to the stiff price you must pay for the high, high cost of protecting yourself from crime, terrorists, yourself, and the weather; for the privilege of wearing clothes, eating, drinking, breathing, and washing; for the chance to freely move from remote suburb to remote industrial sector and back. The remaining twenty odd hours of an IT zombie's rapidly expiring life time was held fiercely hostage by seven hours mandatory sleep (they checked); three hours eating, hygiene, house cleaning, laundry, etc; two or more hours commuting, standing in lines, sitting on hold, navigating through labyrinthine IVRs with a touchpad, dodging marketing offensives, waiting for something to download, and waiting in traffic; and seven to ten hours dressed in a demeaning work uniform plastered with intercorporate advertising like a self-loathing stock car, mutating in sunless airless fluorescent-lit rat mazes and forced anaesthetic easy listening radio playing everywhere at borderline subliminal volume; piss-tested and mutating in CRT-irradiated, high-stress, individuality-annihilating, hair-graying corporate environments. The hoarders and monopolists of life necessities had made consenting slaves of us all. Even free entertainment like skateboarding and libraries were eventually criminalized in the name of profit.

During the new era's gestation period, a mysterious, faceless power had been behaving very much like the evil kings of Greek tragedy: trying in vain to preemptively murder their own inevitable nemeses. This arcane nonentity had first declared war on women way back in the day, and then on black culture and its music: rock, jazz, and blues. A methodology started to develop. Alcohol, long hair and communism became the evil threat to family life; then drugs; then free speech, hiphop, role playing games and metal; then parties, raves and other positive nonalcoholic communal gatherings, then MDMA and GHB; then sharing music; then "terrorism;" then hiphop, then sharing information; then *refusing* to share information with authorities; then the cypherpunks and their crypto fell; and then, very nearly, the ultimate Capitalist crime: "harboring anti-profitable thoughts and agendas." That is, if ARCH's initial anarchic 'transition period' hadn't resulted in one out of six pale vending-machine-fed stress zombies taking out five years of intense frustration on their smug but clueless metrics supervisors with medieval replica collector swords, klingon battle weapons, mail order ninja weaponry and auction-yoinked five dollar disposable machetes. Operation Revenge of the Nerds was the first distributed urban guerrilla action in American history, and also the second most effective. The second action of its kind (and first most effective) was done in Howard's name while he died in agony.

The idea was proposed that America follow Britain's lead and wipe the presence of firearms and projectile weaponry from the face of the continent. Influential institutions such as the Yakuza, the 47 Ronin, and even K'an Monastery made damn sure the political players in favor of the bill had more than enough financing to crystallize it as law. Stealth bills were piggybacked, palms were greased, and martial arts were suddenly

‘registered religions’ with all of their weaponry and training equipment reclassified as spiritual sacraments... *untouchable* by any law. And it was done. America had a total absence of firearms by 2010. Well, Charlton Heston and Ted Nugent probably still had a few stashed somewhere, but Joe Denominator didn’t, and neither did the pigs.

Apparently a Texan by the name of Senator Chas Falstaff was reading Freud’s book Civilization and its Discontents one weekend when old Chas figured out why the law had originally impacted society in such a negative way. Alcoholism and beatings had skyrocketed, grade point averages had fallen, and the population sexploded. Chas flexed his social engineering muscles and created ARCH that night, laying the foundation for what our society is today. His new system made the one-dimensional antiprohibition three-dimensional, and this ARCH of his fixed everything.

"To make a fish taste better, put a predator in its tank."

-Sen. Chas Falstaff

First, all projectile weaponry was strictly banned. Not just guns, but bows, crossbows, slingshots, and anything that automatically deploys a missile, bullet or projectile. Anyone so much as *sees* you with anything resembling projectile weaponry in public, and within 60 seconds, you will be glued to your surroundings and severely beaten by urban pacification officers whose psychological profiles indicate abject inabilities to grasp simple concepts such as *restraint*, *sufficient force*, and *not breathing anymore*. (Their conditioning is a bit rough on their capacities for compassion.)

Next, every other form of personal weaponry was legalized. Swords, knives, bats, war hammers, maces, flails, chains, every conceivable form of martial arts weaponry,

pole arms, steel whips and so on... these were made 100% legal under the aegis of ARCH.

Finally, ARCH legalized dueling by semi-formal process. Everyone started carrying a weapon. Your sword, nunchaku or hammer became something you simply did not leave home without. These weapons required skill, rather than point-and-click mentality: the greatest of all reasons not to be a lazy assed TV-zombie consumerfuck. Hence: better diet and more exercise, or weakness and death.

Violent crime fell dramatically because everyone was armed with brutal weapons that didn't just put a little hole in you; they crushed bone, severed limbs, and left huge open wounds with red stringy stuff hanging out. This provided an extremely good reason to think before you acted like a woodenhead. Anyone you might be stupid enough to attack could possibly be much better at swordplay than you, and therefore you had at least a fifty percent chance of dying *mid-machismo*. Combat became a very serious responsibility. Rape practically disappeared from the face of crime once women started packing crotch-ripping tools of ill omen.

Society shook Darwin's hand and welcomed him back to the program. While guns required no intelligence, no strength, no strategy, and very minimal hand-eye coordination, no one had the time to be a lardass anymore, because weapons training and daily exercise were now in the same genre as brushing your teeth and putting that fitty aside for a potential mugger. Those who were too weak, too lazy, or too stupid to get off their asses and train became easy victims who got quickly weeded out. Austerity, nobility and strength of character returned as well. Joe Denominator became a decent martial artist. If you had a good weapon, regular exercise and weapons training were

sufficient to ensure your survival. ARCH gave the warrior code, along with all of its honor and self-discipline, back to humanity.

Back in the day; that is, if you happen to be the class of warrior who refers to feudal Japan as “back in the day,” most swordfights resulted in the deaths of both swordfighters. Against an equally skilled kenshi, you had a fifty percent chance of dying, as well as an extra twenty-five percent chance of being horribly dismembered or critically wounded, even if you *were* the victor. Since medicine back then wasn’t exactly the fountain of youth it is today, a half-decent gut wound or a severed limb had a pretty good chance of turning greenish and killing you. Especially if the other guy was a real bastard and liked to dip his sword in horse shit and rotten carrion.

Nowadays, there exists a separate branch of medical insurance devoted specifically to dueling. This insurance is mandatory in order for a formal challenge to be extended within the protocols of ARCH.

Aside from several weeks of pain, discomfort, being crippled, and having to do all that irritating physiotherapy, losing an appendage in a duel isn’t the big deal it used to be. As long as that appendage isn’t the roundish one with the big mouth on it that issued the challenge in the first place. Despite the literal miracles the medical community has performed over the past twenty years, heads still don’t go back on properly. The last poor bastard they guinea pigged gouged out his eyes, pulled off his ears, broke his own nose and chewed off his lips and tongue.

The best swordsmen and swordswomen (*kenshi*) look down on all this med tech. They say there was a time (back in the day,) when what really separated a good kenshi from a true master was the ability of the master to not worry about getting hit. At all. She

would merely clear her thoughts and let her reflexes do all the blocking and attacking and footwork for her while she basically just watched. This is called *mushin*; no-mind. They argue that med tech nowadays is making something like mushin available to Joe Denominator. Most people who have been in a legit duel say that they honestly didn't believe they would die. There is actually a small movement of honor-driven kenshi who refuse to pay for the insurance, and do all their dueling illegally. Doing so preserves an essential part of their warrior-spirit: the part that gains strength when it confronts death on a level playing field.

Your average punk ass 15 year old street ronin, on the other hand, can't fucking *WAIT* for the day when he and his buddies can blast some serious Tibetan deathcore out of their Ghettoassassin3000™ DoomBoxes and chop each other to pieces indiscriminately with their cheap ewarrior.com 420 stainless steel ninja-tos. They'll come out of the hospital a week later with cool scars and feeling pleasantly refreshed from clean sheets and expensive hospital food with actual nutrients and protein in it. And go back the next day and do it all over again. Yeah. What does not kill me makes me stronger. Oh yeah.

ARCH is said to have jointly caused a kind of North American cultural renaissance along with the Palmers Case, direct democracy, and the advent of waiver licenses. Everything went right. The Western World even conceded to limiting its powers of global economics, allowing small businesses to flourish and grow like moss around the bases of all the impossibly tall glass industrial sectors. You could once again buy a delicious and suspicious vendordog from a swarthy and incomprehensible Uzbekistani



with a pet monkey who picks your pockets while you work the 45-condiment rack.  
Definitely "the best of times."

Like ARCH, The Palmers v. Hendrickson Case used similar legal loopholes to establish all psychoactive substances as religious sacraments within the membership of the Palmers. So if you were a member of the Palmers, you never had to worry about having your stash confiscated or getting your leg eaten off by a genetically engineered drug dog. Of course, you had much weirder things to worry about... like whether or not the fabric of space-time was going to unravel too early and cause an ontological apocalypse. Palmers were a generally incomprehensible lot. Some subcultures grow to be so exclusive that the members find themselves unable to communicate with outsiders because they speak entirely in in-jokes, specialized jargon and contextual references. (Some have called this "antilanguage," though true "antilanguage" typically implies its users are hiding something worth hiding.) Psychedelic-metaphysical subcultures were either really good or really awful at using so-called antilanguage, and the Palmers were among the best/worst.

The success of the Palmers Case resulted in a rash of expedient new drug cults all trying to get refugee status from a drug war that only seemed to be persecuting them for profit. Bureaucracy couldn't keep up, and the drug situation overgrew the government in a matter of months. Once they finally realized that every nook, cranny, closet, stairwell and brewing tank was **rife** with tinfoil, high-pressure sodium criminal lights and fugitive flora, prohibition was, for the most part, lifted. The only chic drugs left were the ones that remained restricted... alcohol, nicotine, genetically modified opium products, fantasy, and a small handful of designer drugs made by particularly disturbed Serbian chemical

engineers with strange political agendas who left the same nihilistic aftertaste in every monstrous pill they created. It was once again morally righteous to get high every once in a while. Cases such as *Palmer v. Hendrickson* no longer happen. Supposedly, the Supreme Court got so perturbed at the subsequent rash of formal attempts to get legally high that they finally summoned the balls to put controversial Internet Democracy in gear; only referendums for victimless crimes at first, but destined to become the first full-blown, real continent-wide democracy. Internet Democracy turned out to be a political system so good that most developed nations eventually adopted it to various degrees of voter freedom.

The other major problem America once had was that nothing was permitted to be fun anymore. Lawsuits had grown into an omnipresent demon powerful enough to legislate the fun out of everything, right at the engineering stage. Safety first, enjoyment last. Just as with guns, but with barratry, Americans had the power to effortlessly attack one another, almost indiscriminately, for the least logical of reasons. If Joe Denominator tripped in your yard and broke his own ankle; if Joe drank his own alcohol at your flat and then drove home and crashed; if Joe spilled his coffee in his own lap in your restaurant; if he used the hair dryer you sold him in his bathtub; if he climbed your apartment building and fell... all of those situations were once ***your problem and not Joe's***. Believe it or not! Before Internet Democracy gave collective birth to the wearable lawsuit-waiver/splatter-insurance known as the ROAM, anyone could have exploited each of those situations to their massive advantage using high-priced legal highwaymen to steal your money at gavel-point. Nowadays, a photo booth picture, a signature and a \$25 application fee gives you license to tightrope walk those 8<sup>th</sup> floor crossbeams above

mall food courts should the fancy strike you. Sure, it means a lot of business for the medical people, but ever since the multinationals privatized medicine, they're always happy to take your credit card number, your dueling insurance PIN, and *especially* your ROAM account, no matter how qualified you may be for a Darwin Award.

ROAM stands for "Responsible for Own Actions Metawaiver," and it functions as a legally binding promise to never frivolously sue, and as an insurance account to pay for, say, fishing your body out of a sewer or scraping your gore off of a Deeptransit tunnel wall. The ROAM is an RF-queriable chip that you wear like a dogtag. There are different niveaus of ROAM insurance, and the most expensive niveau – Deluxe coverage - effectively frees you from victimless crime and punishment altogether. Like it says in the attractive pamphlet with pictures of rugged but chic urban climbers and transit rats on the front panel...

- **Basic** coverage is the now infamous "splatter fund."
- **Regular** coverage includes property damage.
- **Full** coverage includes comprehensive maximum fine coverage...  
(so anything you might happen to get fined for is automatically taken care of!)
- **Deluxe** coverage is exactly the same as Full coverage, plus overdose insurance, plus the extra ten dollars a week goes directly to your local police retirement fund... and this information is, of course, prominently displayed on your ROAM's datasheet.

If some pigs see you climbing a parking garage, they can hit a button on their com that checks to see whether or not you're covered. If you are, and you didn't splurge on the Deluxe, you dumb bastard, they just yell insults and throw coffees at you and try to make you slip. If not, well, you know the routine: beatings in dark alleys and evidence creativity. Any unsolved crimes lately and you're the guy.

Before the renaissance, Joe Denominator was always scoffing at ideas like anarchism. "*Anarchism would never work*," Joe would always say, "*because the strongest and most powerful would organize into well-armed gangs of bullies and push everyone else around*." This was truer than Joe realized, and he needed to look no further than his friendly neighborhood police department to see this principle in action. The mother of all gangs. After the renaissance, there were still cops, but they actually did their jobs, let people enjoy themselves regardless of the profit agendas of multinational juggernauts, and thanks to ROAM, the focus was on **real** crime most of the time. This helped the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding their professional reputation as a benevolent force. It would take at least 20 more years before everyone would believe that cops weren't tapping their internet pipelines; weren't planting time-release evidence bombs in everyone's computers to guarantee guilt in every potential case if necessary; weren't feeling up preteens in cruisers and beating minorities in dark alleys anymore. But actually dealing with rape, murder and torture instead of taking 2-man 2-week vacations staking out dimebag deals between friends was definitely a step in the right direction.

It wasn't that social anarchy was flawed, it's just that, well, no political theory, applied, works. Ever. In the history of Earth. Peaceful social anarchy, like what we have now, post-Awakening, (in which our police act more like tactical paramedics) plus ARCH, which bred a culture of general personal responsibility and honor... this was the best system we could come up with, despite its flaws. It was no Capitalism, praise Howard.

The world was a rapidly changing place, and everywhere you looked, a pleasure you'd been assuming to be forbidden revealed itself to have been permitted all along.

Novelty and hedonism were to be found everywhere: poisons; exotic weaponry; masochist body modification dens; the resurrection of the nonprofit rave community; adrenaline junkie kids stone-grinding themselves down to gory stubs trying to subway surf for the first time... Kids in gradeschool were making up to \$10k a week on their classroom terminals auctioning unique +150 battle axes and rare digital magician gear to other imagination-starved online gamer kids; all of whom paid **no** attention whatsoever to their teachers... Teachers who, heavily armed with very real, analog school-board-issue martial discipline weaponry, tended to drone on and *on* about the dangers of insubordination to the fathers of global economics and how it's unfair to the infallible pursuit of profit for congress to demand the full ingredients of Nike's new line of synthetic mother's milk products. Never slander a sponsor. It was a time of twenty dollar designer alcohol cocktails; orgy events; privatized NSA-grade spytech; tobacco bars; 14-year old kids in frictionless Tacron tactical vests and black rubber HEPA masks with spraycans and nozzles in all the grenade pockets and packing hand-decorated, bloodstained medieval war hammers; corporate ninjas; Shaolin street duels and rampant fashion-lesbianism.

Any city with a decent mass transit system and a zoo had an urban gaia spirit of sorts called the Real. When master MCs go into a trance and let that freestyle flow nimble and frictionless from the abyss of the subconscious, those are the Real's warsongs. When one of the city's urban infiltration ninja masters explores the dark and dusty bowels of a newly constructed skyscraper for the first time, that is the Real probing and analyzing itself by full-duplex channelling their mutual consciousness; guiding the ninja's infiltration, juicing his reflexes, lensing his awareness and experiencing the new

restricted area through the senses and impressions of the channeled master infiltrator.

*That's* how they never get caught.

Nothing was true.

Everything was permitted.

Well, everything but *one* thing. And to control that, a sinister agency called Nod gave birth to itself.

Nod is the name of a nonexistent multinational lottery corporation in control of the banking systems and economies of a rapidly growing collection of Carribean and South Pacific countries. All data goes in and out in scattered bursts through three random, secure and transparent anonymizing relays hosted by data havens; one in orbit, one on Sealand and one in their own reinforced vault on an autonomous server, finally collecting and establishing a public-key authenticated and encrypted session with a slight delay at the other end. Clients must contact Nod in this manner. The locations of their offices, if any exist, are unknown, although Turkey is a popular theory.

Possible events anonymously appear on a message board... "politician X dies within 7 weeks," ; "Yakuza leader Y found slain within 36 hours," ; "Mexican government destabilizes," etc. Next, bets against or in favor of the hypothetical event begin to show up pseudonymously posted next to the entries. Nod administers this

lottery, anonymously forwarding encrypted wagers of interest to certain independent subcontractors whom Nod has determined will probably work profitably for the House.

Of course, the clients are there to lose. No one is accountable, nothing is provable, and Nod is *frighteningly* rich, even by shadow corporation standards.

It is probably Nod's opinion that culture is the scourge of profit, and that wherever culture waxes, profit wanes. This opinion has been mathematically proven and AI-verified, and therefore any act, including murder and tactical culture suppression, may be carried out in its name. Once determinism has been established, moral responsibility has been absolved.

It is Nod's Mission Objective Mandate (*MOM's the Word*) to end the new renaissance by any means necessary. Corporate culture would not survive an era of leisure, creativity and invention. Lords and serfs was the most profitable of all known possibilities, and Nod was very easily keeping it that way. Even if it was a new renaissance, corporate power did not ebb; no power flowed back to the people. Power cannot flow back without open channels - without powerful, motivated and unpurchasable souls to receive that power and distribute it wisely. Nod seeks out these open channels with intelligent efficiency and then pseudonymously bets on 'closing them'. Nod bets high, and blindly.

## Chapter Two

Talia was locking her apartment door with a bent street sweeper bristle and a dremeled strip of black hacksaw blade when she noticed her neighbor Howard, who was standing, or rather rocking and wavering, in front of his apartment. She watched him stare at his door for a while, and when he failed to notice her, she said, cheerfully, “Hi, Howard.” He made a gagging, bubbly growl like a dry heave, then slowly looked up at her with a facial expression of utter disbelief that seemed to beg the question, “uh, how the fuck did you manage to fit all nine of those baby clown heads into your mouth at once?”

“What’s wrong, Howard?”

Howard signed back to her. He wasn’t deaf, and neither was she, but they were both fairly fluent in American Sign Language, so they tended to communicate as such. Talia usually just used her voice because, although her comprehension was good, she could never quite master ASL’s telegraphic grammar, and it was faster and more expressively accurate to just *talk* to the freak. She’d heard many rumors under the privacy roar of the building’s archaic coin-operated laundry facilities. One rumor had it that Howard once spent three months alone in a cottage in northern Quebec, and during that time, he deliberately destroyed his vocal chords through methodical, brutal, bloody screaming exercises. *Well, as crazy as it sounded, it did explain all the horrible noises that emanated from his throat whenever he got smashed and forgot he was mute.* Supposedly, he had done it ‘because he despised social conversation and wanted to stop being a part of the problem.’ She didn’t know what that meant exactly, or if it was even



true. All she knew for sure was that he was some kind of ex-genius chemnut who she always seemed to be rescuing from both sides of Custer's last drug war.

He signed: "*Me forget...*" and thirty seconds later, "*where me... live.*"

"Right on the other side of that door, Harold. Number 333."

Howard became visibly panicked. He signed: "*How you do that?*"

"How am I doing what?"

"*THAT! THAT! How you do that?*"

"Wh- what am I doing?"

"*You me-scare. Please stop. Please stop!*"

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be stopping, Howard. Stop what?"

"*If you can't stop, please never use name. Everything worse more confusing when use name H-o-w-a-r-d like that. Not even possible! Not make sense. Not make any sense!*"

"Can you describe what's happening, How- uh ... Howwww it's happening?"

"*You KNOW! You know what happen. You only try make worse, make me say what YOU do to you. Can't stand it.*"

"OK, look, whatever. I have to go to Ken Sing Tan and try and hook up with a sword. Key word here is **Muramasa**. Yeah, that's right, the **Real**. Envy me. But I mean, are you going to be OK?" *I don't have time for this bullshit right now, but Howard looks fucking **rough** and he needs to get inside and lie down before he goes facefirst into the ground and breaks his nose and teeth again. Jebus what a twink.*

"*Wait. Please. For-me? Me not want go downtown. Me not need sword. Somebody will get hurt.*"

“No. Listen carefully. I am going downtown. You are going into your apartment for a nap, OK?”

*“But me just come from apartment and you lost and you seem-to need help and confused.”* His eyes and head lurched, trying to make it easier to force real-world sensory data through highly selective chemical filters.

“No, that’s YOU.” *Whoa. I wonder what he's on this time.*

*“That exact same what me said - no. No, wait... me mean me or you?”*

“Fuck, I don’t know, Howard. You lost me at...” She sighed and then signed:  
*"How you do that?"*

*“OK. Wait. Logic. Think. Think. OK. When me say - no, wait... when word “me” or word “I” used, they refer-to man or woman?”*

“Uh, depends on which of us uses them?” Howard absently made a fist around his right thumb at this and then pulled it out. “OK look, I’m going to miss the TTC. Just go inside that door and lie down okay?”

*“No! Wait. If me can solve problem how you do that, everything make sense. Everything fine...”* He signed desperately and passionately; deadly serious about needing to figure out whatever it was he was tripping on.

*Buddhist compassion never said anything about having to humor every fucking lunatic that crosses your path. ...or did it? ... I forget.* She let out a melodramatic heave of exasperation. “OK, but look, you’re going to have to say **exactly** what it is. I mean, I know it’s a big *game* and I’m probably toying with you and trying to make it worse on you and all that, but you have to just come out and say it if you want me tell you how I’m doing it, OK?” *How's that for humoring?*

“OK, OK...” It took him a long, stressful time to finally come up with, “*How possible... you use **MY** mouth... when you... talk?!*”

“Um, bye.”

“Bye.”

Talia shook off the momentary dumbfoundedness and left in a hurry. She had heard from a reliable source that her boy Trin had gotten hold of an authentic signed Muramasa, and was about to put it up for grabs.

She made her way towards Ken Sing Tan Market. Normally, if she was meditating, her Ogg would be dishing out an all-out methcore or neo-Rotterdam assault ... If she was partying, writing, painting or drawing, nothing but Libyan deathtrance would do. Middle Eastern breakcore just unlocked those parts of her brain that were seemingly devoted to the creative orgasmic spurt. But tonight, as always, going into the city for any reason necessitated the ruffneck, rude bwoy science-droppage. MC Pornelius was slamming *Cracknology* .45, his sickest track – digitally channeling the Real by proxy though her oversized dhp240s - Porn-dog's mad urban nightmare loops made her feel like the hardcore street samurai she always wished she was. For, the Way of The Street Samurai was the single purpose of tonight's excursion - to do everything necessary to hook up with an authentic Nihonto from Trin. A portable throne for her soul.

*Cracknology 45 ... MCs get dissed, pissed, nailed alive  
to my wooden dummy shaolin wristlocks  
kissed my fist crucified on my right cross  
dunk your face in blood like John the Vampire Baptist...*

She loved being out in the concrete, away from the temple of involuted rumination her apartment had become. The gravity of that place sometimes gave her semi-permanent swing-vertigo the further she strayed from the first home she ever felt relaxed enough to call her own. Her favorite smell in the whole world was the smell of an empty parking garage. It was a scent so real, so practical, so poetry-free. It was little details like that often made her think of herself as a bulldyke in lipstick. But even with the shaved head and the steel capped 14-hole red nPs warrior caste boots, she still had the sweet raspy voice, the baby elvish face and the girlish frame that kept her from coming across as a bull to all the fems.

She passed one of her favorite living works of art, which was a large, one-story wall framing a gravel lot, just up Qin Street from City TV. The wall was always being bombed by the best graff crews in Teedot, some direct descendents of legends like CASE and SEAK, so the wall always flashed the sickest new bombart in town. Gremlins, tanks, demons harvesting souls, little homey guys with big phat pants brandishing oversized spring-enhanced RazorBlades, the wall had it all.

She stopped for a little while to soak it all in. One of the pieces slapped a massive, stupid grin on her face. The FEZ had done a depiction of her in her skin-tight brushed leather load-bearing infiltration gear, perched on a window ledge; with three half-man, half-pig Keystone Cops bumbling blindly past her in full urban pacification gear.

There she was; manga-hot, stylized and eight feet high... her weekend exercise routine had evolved into street mythology. Talia's neck and shoulders went cool and

tingly from the exaltation that this maddest of all mad props bestowed upon her. She would have to get a disposable camera on the way back home.

*M to the C to Pornelius, freestylin*

*Feeling this, buckwildin while Jesus freaks truck drivin*

*I move in to silently close up the distance*

*Twixt the meat of your dreams and your bloodless existence*

She continued on, passing Uzbekistani vendordogs, industrial polymer-sniffer zombie kids and plastic surgery whores, homeless freestylers, snake-handling street preachers, stray dogs, people she could have sworn were real vampires (were it not for their apparent efforts to appear that way;) and past a wide variety of urban ambassadors out there getting in peoples' faces and fully representing just about everything she loved about the city in their own unique way.

In the fleeting, unmixed silence between *Libido Galvanization Projekt* and *SIGINT's Funniest Basslines*, she heard a half-slapstick Latino Crew accent come from the ground to her rear left. It said, "Holy shit, L'Aragna Nera!"

Ready to run in a random direction as fast as possible, she instinctively dropped her dhp240s into their combat-ready position on her neck and quickly scanned the area for threat levels. Then she spontaneously burst out laughing. The origin of the accent was a local gangsta and dealer, Carne Asada, who was crouched over a roadkilled cat with a piece of yellow sidewalk chalk. The horribly exploded and flattened cat still had a

three-dimensional head on its two-dimensional body. From its mouth came a bright yellow cartoon caption bubble, reading: OW! My fucking SPINE!

Talia almost pissed her pants. She would definitely have to stop and get a disposable camera. She made fun of him immediately, putting on her worst accent. "Holy shit, it's C-Pimp! ... Wat gwan, Carne? that's fucking hilarious."

"You know me? Wow. How j'you know me?"

"Everybody knows you, Carne. All the best 'chit in Teedot, where does that come from?"

"From me!" He glowed and fisted his chest.

"You know it."

"Not juss'at ... check dis shit..." With every milligram of bravado he could muster, Carne reached into a red leather shoulder bag and looked around suspiciously, making a little O with his mouth and darted his narrowed eyes side to side. Out came a greyish steel puzzle box of maddening mechanical complexity. He protected it from common view with his back. Sweat formed on his brow.

"Woah - what is that, GMOpium?"

Carne was obviously enjoying the rush of carrying extremely rare and treasonous swag. "Nah chica ... Fantasy... LPMT." Long stress on the T.

Talia's jaw dropped in amazement. "Gwahhh. What the fuck are you doing with that?" She worried about being associated with Carne; started thinking about disappearing - *fast*.

"This little G Trin says he can sell it to the Yakuza. He tell me he can get me any fucking thing I want. **Anything**, know what I'm sayin?" Big gold grin.

“Carne, put it away, now! If you get busted, you leave me the hell out of it.”

“*Whatever*. This shit’s a big fucking lie anyway.” Carne was serious.

“What do you mean, it's a big lie? Fuck, PUT IT AWAY! I don’t know you!” She put her hand up to her face and started walking away.

“I stayed up for three days on speed and I finally cracked the fucker. I'm a *genie*, yo. It moved around and shit and went all like this," [...wild churning gestures and bad spitty mechanical sound effects,] "and this alarm clock thingy in the middle of the square went down from 6 to 5, yo. So I put half the yellow shit back in the capsule, put the pill back in the cube, did the opposite of how I opened it, it went back up to 6, and I railed the other half..." He suddenly unsheathed his combat knife and gripped it intensely with both fists, "...and strapped on *El Mariachi* here and went out prowlin' for some of those redbot marachismo cherries to fuck up." He glanced down at Talia's screw-riveted, steel-toed 14-hole cherry nPses and went numb for a second. Making the best of all possible recoveries, he chose nonchalance and just continued on with his point as if nothing personal whatsoever had just transpired. "So I was walking around and then I didn't feel like fucking anybody up anymore, so I got a Phat Boy combo and went home. Shit made me drowsy. Didn’t do nada. It must be like, what’s that word?”

“Psychosomatic?” She wondered how Carne could possibly have the intellectual capacity to get a pill out of that thing.

“Yeah," he interjected, "Psych-o-matic. It’s yellow talcum powder, gringa.”

“You know, Carne," she offered carefully, "it’s not supposed to work on angry, violent people..."

Carne feigned innocence. “I’m not violent. Who told you that?”

Talia snickered. "Yeah, well, it must be coincidence night."

"What you mean, coincidence night?"

"I'm going to Trin's right now," she beamed.

"No shit? Wow. You looking for some geisha pussy too? Don't do that to me.

You gotta let me watch. No, wait... we could get like a group rate. Word."

"No, you fucking pigdick bastard, I need a sword." They feinted attacks at each other, testing their mutual combat reflexes.

Carne lunged unpredictably with the first half of a dragon sweep as Talia half-evaded and half-countered with a pulled axe kick to his right clavicle. "Ah, yeah... Lesbians with blades. I gotta go be, you know, alone for about five minutes ..."

Talia just groaned and rested the tip of her thumb on the underside of the squarish teflon-coated tsuba of her laser-cut scale tang triple-riveted katana, gently teasing the blade in and out of its passive resting position, flashing just a little promiscuous glint of crosshatched cablesteel. "Ever been gutted by a bridge cable before, you dirty fuck?" Resting your hand on your spiritual weapon as a threat, or as an escalation of violence, is deadly serious; just not in this particular company and context.

He grabbed his crotch with both hands, counterseductively. "My bridge cable's bigger than yours, chi-caa!"

"Let's go, asshole," she sneered.

This friendly back-and-forth continued all the way to Trin's.

\* \* \*

To Teedot's warrior-monk subcultures, Trin was the Man.



But Trin was no simple matter to deal with. He was both an absolute monopolist and an absolute eccentric, which, combined, made business with him extremely frustrating. See, whenever you did business with Trin, he sent you on a scavenger hunt for some ridiculously obscure object. This was Trin's finder's fee. Sure, he can hook you up with a signed gendaito, with certificate and custom furniture, including your choice of leather or silk wrap, which he will do by hand, and all that for no more than forty percent Japanese Black Market value; Yakuza prices - but there's always a catch... To pay him for his nearly supernatural sword-location powers and smuggling method, and for his expert hand at professional polishing and wrapping, you must go on a Grail-like quest into the Heart of Teedot's Darkness and bring him back whatever bizarre-ass object he's decided he must acquire. No one has ever managed to figure out what it is that Trin does with these quest objects, since they are never seen again, but the most popular, and most likely wrong hypothesis, is that he provides a kind of unique item-finding service to the Japanese idle rich, who, as a finder's fee, provide him with tipoffs from the Nihonto Black Market. But Trin came off as sufficiently crazy enough to actually want all of that weird shit for personal use, and most people didn't care to bend their imaginations backward that way by bothering to deduce the nature of said "personal use..."

A small selection of the things Trin has been known to ask for:

An arcade game called Super Sonic Blast Man by Taito corp; recalled in 1996 due to a rash of lawsuits from hand and wrist injuries. The game had a punching pad which would register how hard you punched it, dealing the appropriate damage to your digital enemies.

A carton of Blackjack gum; a black licorice-flavored chewing gum, which Beeman's Co. stopped producing in 1986 due to lack of demand.

Trin was also rumored to be a souldiamond collector. Souldiamonds are synthetically produced 0.5 - 10 carat blue diamonds made from the carbon in cremation ashes. The most valuable souldiamonds on the market – frequently the prime targets of extreme jewel thieves – are the souldiamonds of evil, powerful, famous, twisted, brilliant, insane, autistic and schizoid individuals, often mounted in evil platinum biomech jewelry. Although it costs consumers less than nine thousand dollars to turn dead guys to diamonds, the souldiamonds of certain monstorous serial killers, 47 Ronin, geniuses and master thieves have always fetched millions, and change hands frequently.

A man named Wim Nightscales, apparently ex-47 Ronin, once delivered Trin's request for ten pints of healthy human blood, AB negative. He delivered it still warm, in dollar store tupperware, and had asked if it was alright that the blood was probably saturated with adrenaline. Trin did the man's wrapping and polishing for free.

Naked photographs of various small-time commercial actors. The guy from the toothpaste ad. The girl from the tampon commercial who pours the blue shit all over the tampon. The old woman from the denture adhesive commercial. The twin sisters from those cheesy sword commercials...

Trin had a rusty eye. He was once shortening the tang of a field-issue katana, the ex-blade of a particularly lanky Japanese officer. It was to be adapted for use by a five-foot-one girl, and so it had to be shortened to narrow her grip for more efficient cutting leverage. Trin's grinder threw a shower of molten steel sparks into his naked left eye; his right eye protected by a jeweler's monocle used to scrutinize for *kizu* (nicks and imperfections.) His vision was unaffected by the accident, though the metal had thoroughly rusted by the time the doctors managed to squeeze out all of the extractable

chunks. Trin didn't really mind having a rusty eye. One of his clients once used an American expression that he didn't really understand - "You have a good eye for swords, Trin," and he gradually misinterpreted this passing compliment into a belief that his eye possessed preternatural sword-related powers. The eye was, after all, embedded with small flakes of the seat of a warrior's soul.

\* \* \*

Talia looked over at Carne and interrupted their supervillain banter. "Is this it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

The sign was an amateur green and purple paint job that Teedot's irritant-class acid rain had rendered nearly illegible over time. Especially if you couldn't read Vietnamese:

"TRIN'S IMPORT & EXPORT"

A plate glass window full of red and green statuettes of Chinese dragons; Maitreya Buddhas ('fat buddhas'); Gautama Buddhas ('diet buddhas'); fans; kung fu shoes; baoding balls; paper lanterns; kimonos; mah jong sets; go boards; calligraphy sets; incense; sake sets and telescopic T'ai Chi swords made of cheap-assed chromishness. If you have ever taken a stroll in Ken Sing Tan Market, you know that this window display makes Trin's sword smuggling operation about as inconspicuous as Nobody in Particular. It was an altogether brilliant front.

They shoved each other, both trying to be the first one inside.

Inside was stale and dark; the air pungent with cheap cherry-flavored incense. Stacks of factory-produced, flattened, stale-smelling merch against the walls and on the floors. A flawed Korean dragon statute caught Talia's eye. Glass pretending badly to be creamy jade. The price tag made her choke and laugh simultaneously. \$1200.00, crossed out, with \$19.95 underneath it. Most of the items in the store bore this shamefaced attempt at trick psychology. Did anyone, in the history of cheap oriental merch, ever fall for this? Yeah. Probably.

Trin's English was fast, furious, and choppy. Words flew from his mouth like a gaggle of retarded geese on crack. "Hey Carne my main man from downtown Underground OK USA!"

Carne just shook his head. "'sup, Trin?"

"Yeah my main man what's shaking what's going down?" Several indecipherable pseudo-hiphop gestures followed. *Possibly an Asian gang thing?*

"Got that *box* of *rice* you were looking for," Carne enunciated.

Trin screwed up his face all smily and comical. "Yeah yeah box of rice box of rice cool cool. And the girl?"

Talia said only, "Muramasa," and Trin's central nervous system changed gears.

"Oh yeah right on fantastic... you heard of the black market right well I'm the yellow market, son. One sec OK I close the shop OK? OK!" Trin went outside and pulled down the corrugated aluminum riot door, ducking under and locking it from the inside. He was about 90 lbs., with a typical Vietnamese prep cut, gold and platinum like a pimp's Christmas tree, brown corduroy pants, white, brown and yellow silk shirt depicting cowboys on horseback lazily spinning their lassos in the sunset. "OK down to

business down and dirty let's make a deal." Speaking almost exclusively in clichés from American television made Trin feel more comfortable out of his element. Considering what kind of a man he was, even the familiarity of his own live-in store was, unfortunately, out of Trin's element. Talia wondered whether he sounded like this in Japanese too, when he dealt with the Yakuza. Maybe he sounded like B monster movies and hentai...

"OK - First the box of rice let me see let me check it out." Carne pulled the crazy pillbox from his duffel bag and tossed it casually on the counter.

Trin fixed his rusty eye on it for awhile, examining it from all angles. Even with Trin's chicken-on-angel-dust dexterity, he managed to pull out a U-Test-It kit and set it up on the counter with all the cool efficiency and austerity of a Zen tea ceremony. He scrutinized the 6 surfaces of the cube with his jeweler's monocle, telling his clients all about the boxes in the best English he had, "You know, can sell rubbings of these cubes on Viet black market get four million dong each just for one rubbing. Can buy almost a yard of rayskin for that! No two boxes alike. Always same craftsmanship and function. All made by same guy. Box maker engineer guy, right? All these cult guys think Mista box maker guy "enlightened one" and he teach people wisdom and learning through mechanical riddle in cubes." Trin kept trailing off, his attention repeatedly sucked in by the allure of the first puzzle on the first surface... the one from which Carne had miraculously pinched. Trin lapsed into total attentive consumption for several awkward minutes while they both stood there trying to figure out what to do next.

It was Carne who finally broke Trin's diamond concentration, "Can't you just wedge a fucking pickaxe... or, ooh! ... a *crowarhammerbar* in there? ...yeah, and just

break all the pills out of that nerd-ass Chinese fingerpuzzle biatch like you crackin domes, homes! Shit, son!"

Carne startled the monocle off of Trin's face, but Trin's reflexes somehow caught it before it landed. He secretly wanted to slap Carne for such blatant ignorance of his own merchandise; a serious mercantile trespass in certain markets; but Carne's brand of ignorance was frictionless as teflon. Insults passed over him and through him like a blissful reed in the wind. Trin tried anyway, if only to impress Talia with his knowledge of this extremely rare and illicit contraband,

"No way USA! These things built like BOMB. You breaky open, traps destroy all the drug, or give you false poison pill, or inflict a serious bodily injury and harm. You break it you pay for it, guy. Besides, empty boxes alone are collector's item!" Carne just looked around for stuff to lift, oblivious as ever.

After about 12 uncomfortably silent minutes, Trin finally manipulated the box in a way that seemed to make sense, while Carne unconsciously nodded and tried ever so hard not to loudly take credit for having done it first. CLICK. An analog counter on one of the cube's surfaces flipped down by 1 to 5 like a clock radio, the entire surface of the cube shifted mechanically, and an opaque sky-blue gelcap popped out. Trin squealed as he pulled it from the box and carefully pulled the top off of the pill with his long, yellow, cracked fingernail. Frowning at its scant payload, he sprinkled a pinch of the capsule's fine yellow powder into the U-Test-It's little concave crucible, then two drops of blue mystery solution like the shit they're always pouring into diapers and bloodclots on TV. 30 seconds passed.

"Very cool. Must learn code-breaking to open," Trin bragged.

The U-Test-It went PING and its blue LCD display showed: LPMT: 98.7% Cornstarch: 0.2 % Glycerol: 1% Unknown: 0.1%. Trin lit up with the world's worst poker face. He glanced quickly at Carne to see if he'd noticed the results of the test. He had. Crap.

"Okay guy like you said the hotel room and two Yakuza geisha girl and two thousand smackeroos OK?" Trin's diamond-studded tooth glinted shamelessly.

"Yo, you said eight thousand. Now what the fuck is this two thousand shit?" He moved within snatch-and-run range, thinking there must be a backdoor. Technically, he was wrong. There was another way out, but Carne never would have found it.

"OK guy take it easy - think I must have said uh, uh, three or something..." He actually *had* said five; they were both playing the same game. Trin smiled cautiously, "only one problem though, guy."

Carne grimaced threateningly. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"There are 35 more pills in box. I pay *five* thousand for 35 more pills... OUT of box."

"You muthaf-" Talia grabbed Carne's upper arm prohibitively as she interrupted, "Wait. I think know someone who can get them out. Give it to me and I'll bring it back with all the pills on the **outside**. Of course, I want a three thousand or so deal on my finder's fee, you hear me Trin?" Trin just grinned and pushed the box towards Talia.

Carne realized that haggling was useless at this point and sighed, "Aiight. Three. But this better be some high quality pussy tonight, got it? I don't wanna be at no clinic tomorrow with no ring of fire. I come back and fuck you up, know what I'm sayin?"

"Hey no problem mista Carne no problemmo." Trin disappeared into a back room somewhere, followed by sixteen or seventeen digital bleeps that could only have been a paranoiac's safe code. He returned with a black business card and a three foot polished cherrywood box. He set the box carefully down on the counter and fired the card at Carne like a cartoon ninja. It was embossed with a bunch of Kanji and an address typeset in English. Carne stuffed it down the front of his shorts into his Nut-Sac™ - his top of the line frisk-resistant pocketed stash underwear. Trin promised him the cash half of the deal on Talia's delivery of the 35 liberated pills.

"OK now for the lovely miss lady..." Talia moved in eagerly as Trin undid the brass latches and opened the lid. Lying there like a fallen emperor in a cushioned bed of crushed purple velvet was the most beautiful physical object Talia had ever seen. Professionally polished; free from imperfections and rust - a naked Muramasa original with his unmistakable signature and a blade testing certification both etched into the nakago. *Beautiful* choji-midare temper. A plastic sleeve inside the box's lid held its certificate. She was beholding a pinnacle of Japanese history with her naked eyes. Heart pounding, Teedot's infamous *High Priestess of Puncture Wounds herself* lost her cool, felt too much blood fall away from her brain too fast, staggered, and nearly fainted into Carne's arms. There was no **way** this was a forgery. She could feel the spiritual energy and hours of intense, focused concentration trapped between its folds and humming like wet power lines. So could Trin, whose rusty eye could even see the blade resonating with centuries of dormant yin chi.

"Trin," she whimpered, "you are my god."



Carne unwittingly blurted, "Yeah my cousin Fernando has one of those. He practices on shit that the slaughterhouse throws out, like cow heads and shit."

But nobody was listening.

Trin grinned maniacally, "Now ready for the bad news? OK fantastic."

Talia tried to look up at Trin when he spoke, but she failed. Miserably. Her warrior-spirit was busy weeping silently in awe of this magnificent blade, and the experience was making her body weak and nauseous.

Trin produced a little yellow sales receipt with something written on it in big ugly blue capital letters. He held it two feet from her face, but she didn't notice it until he finally rustled it and broke Muramasa's spell. She looked up with delirious car wreck disorientation. Eventually the note's presence registered and she grasped it slow and shaky as Trin closed the lid and returned the blade of the gods to its well-hidden safe. He returned to one very disturbed-looking Talia.

"I don't even know what this is, Trin."

Trin preached it late night TV style, "I give you unbelievable one-time deal for getting pills out of box. Offer not valid in any store!"

"Yeah but what the fuck is a... an..." she struggled to make sense of the title, "Also Splat Zara-scheize-something?"

"Book. It's a book. German, Very rare."

Talia's heart felt strangled. She had no idea where to find whatever the hell this book was. It sounded very, very out of print. See, Talia was literate, just not practising. She stashed the receipt and grabbed the puzzle box, looking around for a comfortable way to carry it concealed.

“OK Catch you guys later thanks for coming out see you around town OK?” Trin let them out and locked up from inside. Supposedly he lived there, though there was no discernible apartment on top.

They stood out in the street, both disappointed and wondering what to do next. “Yo, Carne, wanna go get some Phat Boy with me?”

Carne was *always* down with some Phat Boy. “Hell yeah chica, I was just thinking about a burger too.” They walked slowly and casually towards Teedot’s thickest, greasiest, messiest burger. “Yo, you know what you get if you mix relish and mustard?”

“Sick?”

“Retard.”

Talia sniggered and punched Carne in the arm about three times as hard as he expected.

### Chapter Three

In the space between dreams, where the commercials would go if your dreams were controlled by the media, lived a very lonely man known only as the Man in White. He lived somewhere else, too, but he couldn't remember where. In that other place, he was called Wim Nightscales, but in the space between dreams, *the place where the voices in your head come from*, he was the Man in White. *The space between dreams is the only place in the universe where you cannot hear the voices in your head, and where the voices in your head cannot hear your thoughts.* The Man in White was much, much happier than Wim. *Why? No voices. Without the voices distracting you and breaking your concentration, you are capable of creating reality around you. Once you know you can do that, you can learn to create the reality around others. Reach out to their dreams and introduce novelty to their basically cannibalistic imaginations.* The Man in White taught himself to do this quite easily, (considering his heavily mutated brain,) and thus he brought the rare art of subconscious remodeling to a new plateau. *Outside imagination touches the human mind all the time, but it is filtered down to near-total ineffectiveness. When you introduce anomaly to the imagination at the subconscious level, it changes people's lives. Breaks their routine.* And this was Wim's purpose: creative change through spontaneous chaos.

Wim Nightscales was the other side of the coin...

The only thing the Man in White could remember about Wim was that he heard the voices, and he tried to stop the voices, and every time he tried to stop the voices, he made more voices. Somehow, he knew Wim's efforts to stop the voices were also changing the lives of others. If the Man in White changed lives for the better, he guessed that Wim changed them for the worse. They seemed to be opposites.

One time, the Man in White met a beautiful girl. He tried very hard to change her life for the better, but he had to try many times, since she was highly tolerant to change. After he introduced sufficient anomaly into her imagination to change her life for the better, he somehow became Wim again. The Man in White eventually met the girl in Wim's world as well, and she did something very powerful in his presence. He fell in love with her, then became so confused and weak that the Man in White awoke in some hospital-place that must have been in Wim's world, since he couldn't affect or control anything. He called out to the bald girl, but she couldn't hear him. There were no voices. The Man in White realized that he would never again have control over the reality around himself, let alone the reality of others. At this point, he decided that there was absolutely no point in continuing to be the Man in White. If you die in a dream, the real you dies, since a man without dreams is, essentially, a dead man.

\* \* \*

Phat Boy was the best goddamn burger in Teedot and everybody knew it. Phat Boy's big secret was the Holy Trinity of American fast food: excessive grease, excessive

size, excessive MSG. Excessive grease meant that if you dumped out your phatfries into your burger wrapper and ate your pounderburger over top of them, you'd get free gravy out of the deal. Excessive size meant that you got about twice as much as Joe Denominator's stomach can hold at any one time (hence the pounderburger and Double pounderburger.) Excessive MSG sometimes meant headaches, fainting and disorientation, but only to non-regulars; those who were not yet full-blown junkies to the Phat Boy experience.

Thanks to a little-known loophole in what was left of free trade, Phat Boy used Mexican beef. This afforded Phat Boy the luxury of selling big, greasy, one-pound (precooked wt.) burgers that were five times McStandard size, and at one-fifth McStandard price. Nobody, not even the Devil Clown himself, could fuck with those metrics. Phat Boy had effectively forced the Devil Clown, the Milk Monarch, the Meat Monarch, the White Rook, the Great Bear and the Invisible Rabbit all out of competition and into specialization. Devil Clown went luxury, Milk Monarch went all ice cream, Meat Monarch went all emu, White Rook went the wings and fried chicken route, Invisible Rabbit went veggie, and Great Bear went smorgasbord, complete with rotating metal food track.

But there were two things that really curbstomped the competition; two luxuries unique to the Phat Boy experience that justly elevated it to urban grease mecca status: beer and freestyle.

First of all, Phat Boy was the only burger joint with a liquor license, and Talia had *real* fake ID. Once the entire contents of Joe Denominator's wallet had been shrunk down to single smartcard, fake ID became a "good old days" thing. Alcohol was one of

the only drugs everyone agreed was really bad for, you know – not *them* personally, but bad for all those *other*, irresponsible people out there - and so in order to drink underage, you had to bribe somebody altogether brilliant to crack into public records and change your D o' B. This was impossibly difficult to hook up without a tight connection, but the end result was guaranteed 100% legit. Talia, of course, had many such friends in dark places, and Trin was probably one of them.

Secondly, the freestyle... Phat Boy's kitchen staff was entirely comprised of Teedot's dopest vocal aggressors. If you were a street thug with some serious freestyling talent, you tried hard to get a part-time job at Phat Boy so you could get to know - and occasionally call out - Teedot's finest freestylers and MCs. Teedot was governed by the New Canadian Order, so burger flipping only got you about \$3.25 an hour, but freestyling while you did it could make you famous. Phat Boy's kitchen always had fast, furious vocal terrorism flying out of it like a shuriken storm. Sometimes it was Jamaican Style, sometimes Drunken Style, sometimes Shaolin Style and sometimes Conscious Style, but always the dopest freestyle you'd ever live to hear. See, this way, you could actually get to *hear* it without having to risk going down to the Jane & Finch Murder Mall and being killed by wind and fire wheels and three sectional staves at the hands of the Dark Shaolin.

A word about freestyle: the Dark Shaolin and many others believe that any city of sufficient population and of active hiphop representation tends to evolve a sentient, all-pervasive force... a sort of urban Gaia. Now, lots of peeps freestyle, but true Masters enter into a trance and channel this force through their bodies, catalyzing the mass consciousness called The Real and enabling it to sing its warsongs through the master

freestyler... gently jacking his subconscious and his commandeering his vocal apparatus. Similar trances produce preternatural graff miracles, Jedi breakdancing moves and groove after holy seamless groove on the decks. Hiphop to the Dark Shaolin is the urban Gaia expressing its creative force through the bodies and souls of its believers by bodyrock, by mic, by wax, and by nozzle.

As friendly an environment as Phat Boy was, it was still frequented by the Dark Shaolin, the 47 Ronin, and most of the other dangerous non-vegetarian clans. (The Buddhist Fist and the Asuras, for example, all ate Invisible Rabbit.) It was for this reason that Phat Boy decided to keep it friendly and install a Hong Kong Net.

Talia noticed it as she went in. She pointed out to Carne. "When the fuck did Phat Boy get a Hong Kong Net?"

Carne cringed and crouched slightly. "Yeah, I don't know, probably last week. That shit fucked up my new shirt once. Silk."

Its strands floated aside as they walked to the counter. A Hong Kong Net made a room look like it was full of long, stray spider webs. There was an ultra-thin wire net that spanned across the ceiling with tiny metal balls at each five inch intersection. Thin, wispy strands of clear polymer hung down at various lengths from the metal balls, some all the way to the floor. The polymer was almost impossible to cut; even wire cutters were inadequate. If a fight were to happen, any employee could hit a button on their belt, running an electric current through the net. The current turns the polymer strands to molten superglue just long enough to stick to everything it's touching, then instantly stiffens all strong and flexible like clocksteel. Everyone in the room becomes a fully immobilized marionette; the fight's participants literally frozen in action. The only

problem is, the chemical structure of the polymer is so similar to silk that it fuses at a molecular level with your silk shirt the moment the current goes through it. It easily peels off of all other fabrics and materials after a little spritz from a police-issue aerosol can, labeled "Glisso." Carne, on the other hand, had once been trapped in a convenience store for an hour while they cut his shirt off of him. And read him his rights.

Talia looked over at the freestyle cook, who was trance-vocally spinning the Tale of the Silent Rhinoceros Mechanic while packing blunts in the dark with a lockpick and occasionally flipping Sausage McPhatties into a nearby lake of boiling heartglue. She punched him again... exact same place, right where it hurt. "Hey, Flinchy... There's these two sausages in a frying pan, right? And they're just starting to sizzle, and one of the sausages gets all uncomfortable and sits up and says 'hey man, is it getting hot in here, or is it just me?'" and the other sausage sits bolt upright and screams..." Talia let out the most blood-curdling harpy shriek imaginable: "Holy fuck! A talking sausage!!!" Steel and ceramics unsheathed everywhere. Two cashiers drew at their Hong Kong net deployers reflexively, like well-trained company bioproperty should. Then they remembered the last time Talia told a joke and ended up cracking the skulls of their two least favorite burger enthusiasts together, resulting in unconsciousness, fatal hemorrhaging, and free burgers for Talia and her ten favorite homeless ronin. They let this one slide. Everyone remained calm and slowly, deliberately resheathed.

Unfazed, Rudebwoy mused, *fine ass bitches like dat walk as sweet fairy princesses among ruffnecks like me and me bredren.*



Carne looked around and pretended to laugh really, really badly. He didn't get it. No one in the place had gotten it. *Nowadays, jokes are all about shaming people in public.*

They got to the counter and MC Rudebwoy took their orders. MC Rudebwoy was looking extra dangerous, with his facial scarification casting aggressive shadow patterns across his cheekbones. He was the original Jungle Warrior; winner of the DMC freestyle competition two years in a row. Just don't call him McRudeboy. The Hong Kong net won't even save you.

Talia slapped down her adjusted ID and ordered a large Cheesy Phatfries and a pint of Harry Roberts Dark Ale. Carne went for the Meatcakes on Rye and a forty of Shiv, or as it was called in his hood, "Ghetto Piss."

They sat and fully engaged their respective kills. They couldn't have forced more grease into their bloodstreams with pumps and arterial catheters, but they were acting mostly on addiction, not so much rationality.

Talia looked out the window across the street, watching the photo developing guy lock down his little armored Miyamotophoto hut for the night. "So, Carne, you were saying you're trying to be more creative?"

"Yeah. I sold some shit to this artist last week and the crazy fucker wouldn't stop talking. Most of it didn't make no sense, but he said I needed to express myself in a creative way or I'd probably get depressed or some shit. I just blew it off, but I couldn't stop thinking about that shit he said. So I've been doing some, like, street art. And you know, I think that crazy motherfucker was right. The thing is, it's like when I stayed up for three days and figured out that box, I became a *spiritual*, yo." Talia tried to keep a

straight face. "I feel a lot happier, and uh, *N-lightninged*, and it's like I don't always wanna just clothesline random suckaz on the street as they're passing me anymore, you know?" He poured some Shiv on the floor when nobody was looking.

"Oh yeah. Totally." As she lovingly suckled the evil marriage of molten cheese-fat and Mexican beef gravy from the tip of a drowned fatphry, she wondered if martial arts counted as doing something creative. "So, besides the roadkill thing," she smiled, "which is a work of genius, Carne, seriously, besides that, what else have you done lately?"

"Check it, yo... haiku!"

"Hai... haiku? YOU?! For real?"

"Hell yeah, the best. Not only that, I got this shit called 'etching cream' at the arts and crafts store. So you write your *haiku* with this etching cream on a pig's windshield and it eats right into the fucking glass! Shit is permanent, yo."

"You're a fucking riot, dude! Let me hear one... one you wrote on a cop's windshield. "

"Aight. Check dis:

Rosebuds in autumn

A cold wind from my razor

Peels all their caps back"

Giggling uncontrollably: "Another! Another! "

"OK. You like it? I got one:

Y'all can't em-press me  
Mantis eats her lover's head  
You know what I'm sayin"

"Carne, that's seriously awesome. You kick ass."

"Yeah, I know." Carne was starting to like Talia. In a relative-that-nobody-mentions kind of way... He was a real sucker for flattery of any kind.

They finished their grease and got up. Carne handed her his business card.

CARNE - you know me.

1-888-367-3626 (888-DOPEMAN)

"Yo, you ever need a dealer price on some Assported-By-Carne Dutch E, I'm ya F-in' G, seen?" *Maybe this'll get me laid.*

"Aw, thanks Carne. You're such a sweetie." (*Assported? Ew.*) She put the card in the leather pouch on her scabbard, where she kept stuff she really didn't want to lose. *Assported or not, his was a big deal - E from Taza, at cost.* Being nice to dealers almost always paid off somehow, but this was surprising coming from Carne, who was characteristically all about the bling bling.

"Yo, you take care of that sweet ass." *Maybe this'll get me laid.*

"You know I can..." *Disposable camera.*

"Yeah." *Shit. Me go puff me a cracka A FIREcracka.* He crossed the street and ducked into a convenient blunt-cracking shelter created by an extrusion of

Miyamotophoto's rubbery plexi-armor, rated at an impressive 1750 crowarhammerbar blows, as indicated by the certification stamps on its black kevlar seams.

Talia headed for the nearest pharmacy to pick up a disposable camera. She *had* to get pictures of Carne's roadkill art, and of the flattering graff that was depicting her as street mythology. She passed all the intelligent graff slogans (intelligent, as in RESIST, and not EAT A DICK.) Her favorites tended to be the ones that made her think and laugh at the same time, like WHY IS THERE NO AGE OF CONSENT FOR CHURCH? ; BIBLES ARE JUST AS FLAMMABLE AS PORNOGRAPHY and INCREASE OUR FREEDOM AND WE'LL VOTE FOR YOU.

In line at NeoPharm, she looked at the headline of the newspaper. Apparently some crazy astronomers in Cali committed suicide. They thought God was sending messages to the world from deep space. Stuff about geometry being backwards, and we're all going to die if we don't get rid of money, something about decrypting Nostradamus... typical rag fare... but this was on the front of all the big newspapers. Weird.

On the way out, cursing NeoPharm for perpetuating the archaic conservative practice of dress codes for low-paid employees, now widely considered cultural discrimination and detrimental to business in general, she pulled out her enormous black permanent wedge marker and wrote backwards on NeoPharm's front window, DRESS CODES ARE CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION to the mad cheering of the hungry employees.

It was the best of times.

## Chapter Four

Returning home that night, Talia took the stairs out of pure paranoia. When she got to her floor, the fire door was blocked by something low, soft and heavy. It felt movable, but her paranoia was tweaked, considering the fully loaded LPMT cube and several thousand in paper cash she was concealing. If it was pigs, death sentence. If it was thugs, well, at least she could legally fight back.

She exhales; deals with fear; lets her mind go blank; lets her muscles and nervous system relax; lets her reflexes take over. She silently draws her old nicked-up, oversharpened and worn-in katana from an oily and erect leather shaft and plants a vicious spinning back heel kick just below the heavy metal door's curved aluminum handgrip. Its human obstacle thuds and flies chest-first into a bright green and yellow pleximer Caffeine Machine in the elevator foyer, rebounding with much kinetic enthusiasm and crash landing in a hot and friction-rich skid. Talia dive-rolling-sword-breakfalls into the room and immediately has her would-be assailant prepped and ready to be decapitated under her body weight; restrained by the back of her knee. All she needs to do is lose her balance or lean backward and it's French Revolution time. That's when she stops to look for more assailants and notices she just fucked up Howard.

"Oh my god! Howard! Are you okay? I am *so* sorry." Howard looked rough. She carefully released his head from her awesome bladed deathgrip and helped him up. She could have broken ribs or skull with the force of that kick, and she felt his neck crack several times when she locked it in for the big decap-attack... [a technique she secretly stole while invisibly infiltrating some abandoned urban dungeon... a corporate

subbasement full of pink gaussy nineteen inch monitors, and from the chimney-space above an unused service closet, she watched in terrified fascination as a three man kaishaku team from the 47 Ronin... three of the *actual* forty-seven, offered each of five prominent Asura Triad leaders a choice. Option one was gutting themselves with the ceremonial tanto on the red silk pillow in front of them, and if they didn't cry out or fall over, they would merit a merciful, swift and surgically precise beheading, leaving the flesh between the chin and suprasternal notch attached like a real emperor's execution. Option two was a duel, and the three hitmen seemed to love that one technique; since they used it to terminate four out of the five Asuras after, of course, playing with them like cruel cats for a dozen gory minutes. And each time it was the same: *advance, distract, stun, grab, takedown, wrap, kneel, lean, plant, lever, lean, ka-chop, roll, chiburi, bow*. She almost cheered the fourth one. Asura number five chose wisely and drank two litres of the Ronin's own sake, the fatbellied gourd stamped in wax with the 47-katana logo and everything. He lurched and hiccuped and promptly carved his abdomen up like gangstaguts pie without allowing so much as a whimper to escape his throat. Watching all of this from the shadows overhead, Talia could only think one thought besides remaining motionless and silent... *I must memorize and perfect that technique...* Still, she hadn't ever actually *applied* the technique – that awesome technique that had liberated more than fifty of bidbid.comcom.com's cheapest mannequin heads – and luckily enough, a technique she hadn't applied on Howard, who was actually breathing and looking around, with his head still attached and everything. *Whoa damn... he's fine?! A hell of a lot tougher than he looks.*

He got up and glared at her with the eye that wasn't bleeding. Talia's stomach grew uneasy with guilt and she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. She pulled out the puzzle cube and showed it to him. Howard's face and shoulder seemed to miraculously heal as his entire attention and demeanor focused exclusively on the cube.

He grabbed it immediately and headed for his apartment. Talia tried to stop him...

"Wait! Howard... a TRADE! I need this book... can you find it for me?"

Howard ignored her, gurgled, went inside, and locked the door behind him. *Shit.*

*Um,*

"Okay, well, Howard, I'm just going to slip this under your door okay? It's the book I need in exchange for you getting the pills out of that thing... um," her voice lowered to the raspy tomboy whisper that she knew always made Howard's nuts tighten... oh, he was definitely listening, but now she had to make up some kind of spontaneous compromise... "um, okay look, maybe I can work something out so you can keep the pills, but Trin needs the empty box for some reason okay? Howard?"

***Fuck.*** She slipped the piece of paper Trin gave her under the crack in Howard's apartment door. Her mind raced. *After getting clocked by her for no reason, was there any way he would hook her up with that book, or did he think he could just keep it as whoop-ass restitution? Was she right about letting Howard keep the pills? Would Trin be pissed? She had more important things to think about. Like, what was she going to wear? and how much was she willing to gouge out of her sword fund to buy door tix, water, and clean, nontoxic, government-tested danceypills?*

A record three hours later, Talia was laying on her back in the chillout room, slowly sinking into a bed of blacklit S-foam and ping pong balls. The interior of the bed

was lined with phosphorescent green glowfur. Black starry walls spraybombed with fluorescent aliens, tags and Balinese deities. The whole thing had a distinct "alien egg nest" atmosphere. DJ Prana was spinning ambient so bizarre that it defied explanation, reason and English. Sampling of children's voices talking about monkeys and laughing; refrigerator noises; NASA astronaut broadcasts, sometimes played backwards; angelic choral singing; slowed-down orthodox Jews reading the Qu'ran; Balinese chanting rituals; Fisher Price musical instruments; trapeze and circus music played slightly off-key, and lots of water noises - splashing, surf, bubbling, gurgling and rain.

Twenty minutes ago, she had taken two pink velvet pussies; particularly speedy girl-inclined designer meth analogs straight from Taza that had a tendency to come on hard and fast and last a good five hours of constant, full-body orgasmic dancerrush. Lying there meditatively in the alien nest staring curiously into Hanuman's phosphorescing blue eyes, listening to children talking about how monkeys make funny faces and Hanuman, the monkeyfaced god, smiling knowingly back at her... there was some *coincidence* with Hanuman going on, but she couldn't wrap her head around it. He communicated telepathically with her in a deep, thick Indian voice.

"It's OK, Talia, don't worry - you may also laugh at my face. It looks funny, like a monkey. Laugh. I love you for who you are. Enjoy yourself. Life is fleeting. Go. Play."

And as if the strange coincidence triggered something within her, the pink velvet pussies started to hit her.

Hard.

First, a strange light-headedness that seemed to coagulate around the area just behind her eyes. Mild confusion. Then, a very pleasant sensation like a numbed orgasm



tingled in her groin and crawled all the way up her spine to the back of her head, where it transformed into an even deeper and more personal tingle and slowly, sexily crept all over the entire surface of her goosebumpy skin. Moderate confusion, and total submissiveness to the experience. Her palms were sweating profusely; her sense of balance spinning out of control. She felt every piece of bright orange stubble on her shaven head individually as she ran her hands over it - over and over and over, nearly collapsing from the pleasure every time she did this. She caught herself madly grinding her jaws together with all her jaw strength, “gurning,” as her friend once called it, and briefly wondered how long she’d been doing that. Her clothes felt so good against her skin. Her skin felt so good against her clothes. Not just her internal dialogue, but her body, soul and voice all simultaneously went:

“Ho.....ly....Fuuuuuuuuuck....”

in slow motion.

At that point Talia remembered that if she didn’t get her ass to the main room and start dancing, immediately, she would get stuck there in a lotus-eater’s trance, lying in the alien egg nest for the next five hours going “Oh wow. Oh my fucking god this is beautiful. Oh wow.” So she stumbled to her feet, nearly falling over from the headrush, and felt the hard rhythmic pounding of the main room’s psytrance in her chest, beckoning her down the narrow black hallway.

She took a deep breath that briefly made her whole body feel cold. She popped her sexy J-Gurl-style chewtoy in her mouth, smiling massively from behind it. The music penetrated her chest deeper and deeper as she stumbled blissfully down the hall. Then the main room hit her with a salty wall of body heat and evaporated beautiful people sweat

that was gelatinizing her knees with sensory pleasure. Teedot's alien prince of psycore, DJ Hanuman, had been working a massive epic-style buildup as she fumbled towards it, and just as the wall of sweat hit her, the buildup broke and twelve hundred sweaty psycoreheads went berserk with ecstatic dancefury. Everyone in the room looked absolutely gorgeous and everything was absolutely perfect as Hanuman's animalistic climax fully penetrated her; teasing her ego apart in the process ... and she was lost; fully and recklessly abandoned to the awesome vibe, dancing her way towards the front left corner of the floor. It was not Talia's style to dance for a bit and then mash out against a wall for the rest of the night watching the beautiful people dance. No, she would only be leaving the dance floor to refill her water bottle, and then finally at around 7:30am, when her calves would be repeatedly stabbing her with sharp, agonizing pains from overuse. Only then would it be time to leave.

Talia did this every second Saturday night.

At dawn, as always, she staggered back to the subway recoiling from the overexposure of brain-bleaching daylight, feeling the aftershock of ten hours of deep rhythmic audio pounding still throbbing a relentless 4/4 in her nervous system... *thmm-thmm- thmm- thmm- thmm...* In an out of overburned consciousness amid the clattering and strange accusing stares of pallid squares; no friendly smiling faces or bright colours in sight. Just hostile grey shit. When she finally got home, she picked her lock open and let herself in, shut the door and stripped immediately, limping over to the bathroom in lower muscular agony. She looked pallid and fried in the mirror. Baseless sorrow began to penetrate her. Shame for having too much fun. That old j-c line of crap. She gulped down a handful of 5-HTP and some delicious city tapwater.

Talia dazed off, dropped her water glass, panicked and caught it again. She tried, but she had no idea how long she'd been leaning up against the sink holding the water glass like that. It was warm. Her palms were all clammy. *Damn. I can't sleep this dirty, but I don't have the energy to shower.* Summoning the last of her reserve strength, she slid open the glass shower door and turned the old familiar knobs. *The shower's a necessary part of the ritual. Can't go to bed dirty.*

But instead of water, a fine beige sand poured from the spigot.

“What the?”

She tried the shower knob. It grumbled and shook, then splattered forth a foul-smelling bloody liquid. The tiles cracked and bulged outward; trickles of the same thick reddish-brown liquid sprung from newly formed holes in the grout.

Suddenly, there was a pressurized explosion. A rotten human head flew out of the wall towards her face, wetly headbutting her and knocking her unconscious.

When she woke up, she found herself pristinely bandaged and sitting completely bewildered among an audience of about six faceless spectators in a dimly lit room with walnut tables and green leather furniture. She was in a richly decorated, windowless study, lined wall-to-wall with dark red bookshelves full of sinister, gilded black books with illegible titles on their spines. She and the rest of the spectators were observing two masked men in white Seventeenth-Century sawbones attire who were demonstrating a sort of surgical performance art called ‘Tissue Hypnosis’. One of the surgeons looked up from his work and made momentary, chilling eye contact with her.

The patient was one of the spectators who had volunteered for the demonstration. He was hypnotized by the surgeons and was now in the process of being severely

mutilated by them. Long, rectangular cuts were made into his bald scalp, his eyelids were removed, and then his nose.

A blunt, nasal medical voice addressed the subject from behind one of the surgical masks, “Mister MacMillan, I assure you that you are perfectly fine and completely healthy in every way, and when I count backwards from six to zero, you will awaken into a state of perfect and refreshed health. Six, five, four, three, two, one... **zero**. Wake up, Mister MacMillan. Tell us how you feel.”

Miraculously, none of Mister MacMillan’s deep head wounds were bleeding. He just sort of looked around contentedly; an eerie sight on a guy with no nose or eyelids. He shrugged, told everyone he was fine, and prepared to return to his seat. At this point, the surgeon-hypnotists pointed out to poor Mister MacMillan that he had no nose, no eyelids, and long, deep cuts into the top of his head. It was not until he was actually told this that the uncauterized lacerations started profusely bleeding, resulting in poor Mac’s panicked and uncontrollable screaming. Talia was horrified, but the other spectators chuckled in amusement. MacMillan was then re-hypnotized and his heart was removed. Another post-hypnotic suggestion that he was *fine*. He was roused again and this time they asked him a series of questions over the course of five minutes, all of which he answered in a surprisingly jovial tone... What’s your favorite kind of cheese? Where would you go on vacation? What religion are you? ...

Then the surgeons instructed him to look down at his chest. He stared at the gaping hole blankly, utterly confused.

“Mister MacMillan, we removed your heart over six minutes ago. Here it is, look.” And they showed it to him. He died immediately, accompanied by a thunderous

roar of novelty laughter. His body was carried off, and the surgeons asked for another volunteer.

The Man in White again met Talia's eyes with his, and, inexplicably, she raised her hand. They were going to remove her jaw and then get her to try singing. The spectators hemmed and hawed in anticipation ...

She opened her eyes and faced the spectators. She felt something was wrong. She felt the urge to try to sing, and produced nothing but an awful choking noise. The Man in White instructed her to feel her chin. It wasn't there, and her hand met with warm, bloody pulp that hung tenderly from the roof of her mouth. She tried to scream out in shock but again made only a choking noise.

\*

Talia sat bolt upright in her plastic subway seat, screaming. Other commuters around her were initially startled, but immediately passed her off as some drug addict party kid.

“Shit, I'm not even *halfway* home yet.”

She pressed her face against the window and sighed.

## Chapter Five

Attack Dose #1. 6 pills.

One pill was missing from the set. (*Must obtain replacement ASAP!!! Ask Talia for help.*)

- 6 attack doses x 6 pills = 1 set = 1 puzzle cube.
- 6 pills (1 attack dose) per surface.
- 1 puzzle per pill, 6 puzzles per surface. 36 puzzles.

There is an order to the puzzles... a definite sequence in which they must be done, since solving each puzzle teaches you a necessary foundation on which you must stand in order to come within intellectual grasping range of the next puzzle. Each subsequent puzzle seems to triple in relative difficulty.

The first Puzzle, (P1), has unfortunately already been solved by a previous owner, who, based on its apparent difficulty, could have been any average teenager. (P2-6) were exponentially difficult, and unlocked in a counterclockwise progression. By (P6), I was almost certain S2(P7) would be an actual problem, and I doubted that I had the mental faculties to extract any more than half

of the cube's pills at that rate. But (P7) was easy, and I discovered that each of the six surfaces solved a different set of puzzles which more or less teach you a principle of this bizarre crypto-geometry in your hands by 6 increasingly difficult interactive examples. And then, \*click\*, out comes a pill as your reward.

The strange thing is, each time I solve one of those puzzles, something weird happens to my brain, like a tweaking, twisting, ear-popping, elastic-snapping, reality-warping event in the middle of my consciousness that absolutely disorients me as it happens, precisely at the moment when it clicks and the little blue pill pops out. And each time after that happens, I feel a little bit more comfortable in mundane reality... like my subconscious knows how it all works, but it's just keeping it secret from me so the world can surprise and delight and scare and motivate me, rather than me just being able to predict and control everything. Too difficult to fully grasp, but I have a feeling that I will understand more as I solve more. These boxes must be designed to keep neural power tools out of the hamfisted clutches of the idiocracy.

“Geometry” ; S1{P1-6} - The first set covered geometry; starting with a bad Pythagorean joke and coming full circle back to it in a mind-bending way I could easily write into a masters thesis... *if* I could, hypothetically, retain that much information for that long.

“Cryptography” ; S2{P7-12} is on the opposite face of {P1-6} and seems to cover cryptographic principles represented in the geometrical language of {P1-6}. Getting (P7) out was no simple decryption. I'm going to have to flex my prime factoring muscles for this side, I think.

“Geometric Cryptography” ; S3{P13-18} seems to be cooperative interactions of geometry and cryptography, but I'm sure I will need to learn this cube's cryptographic system before I can even begin to understand how the two interact.

“Geocryptographic Dynamics” ; S4{P19-24} is on the opposite face of S3{P13-18}, and seems to cover antagonistic interactions of geometry and cryptography.



“Dynamic Geocryptographic Dilemmas (?)” ; S5{P25-30}

seems to offer two opposite solutions per puzzle. Some of them look dangerous.

“Applied Geocryptanalysis (?)” ; S6{P31-36} just scares

me. Every potential solution on the S6 face appears to dismantle the cube entirely if successful.

I must obtain a replacement pill for (P1) as soon as possible or all of this will be for naught.

- Obtained (P2-P7) and ingested them orally with less than 30 minutes of air exposure in dessicated tupperware for (P2) and only 30 seconds for (P6). This was probably unnecessary; the blue capsules seem quite thick. That was 15 minutes ago. For some reason, I keep picturing some awful car wreck. I need to go relax.

HG, 8:45pm

And like a litre of botulinum toxin poured from thin air into your city's water supply, a single Madthought infiltrated Howard's imagination, and everything went upsy-crossy.

Even sober, Howard's visual / hypothetical imagination was very, very lucid. While he knew there was no way to tell how vivid his imagination was in comparison to that of the average person, he had collected a pretty well-rounded proofset from observation of others that his imagination was theirs, times ten, to the eighty-third power.

And it was exactly during times like this, (with his serotonin and dopamine deliberately antagonized and selectively receptor-clogged by LPMT, inducing a feedback-intense cognitive atmosphere that put the calibre of his protoautistic schizophrenia in the Bad Cartoon Hall of Shame,) ... it was times like THIS that imagining a fatal car accident from the passenger's point of view, in slow motion, in disturbing detail, might be a *bad* thing. Teeth, meet steering wheel. SLOWLY.

This horrific spectacle, playing over and over and over again in Skulldome Theater, disturbed Howard right into the fetal position on his cold blue tile floor, writhing as if breathless underwater. But eventually, this hyper-realistic drunk driver school hallucination apexed, and, to the fanfare of a twenty-one million action potential salute, it triggered a psychic trauma that threw reality like a handful of ergot-infected rye into a strong gale. With no solid foundation in commonplace reality, his imagination went fuckwild. Although it was mostly indecipherable imagery and symbolism, most of it was so fast, stuttery and dislocated that it felt as though some malevolent god had poured the informational contents of an evil library directly into his head. And it was all bad news.

He heard the screams of extreme German opera divas, laid out on luxurious varnished walnut medical tables with their backs opened up and the protective bone of their spines carefully removed so that their central nervous system could be stretched over two slotted boards and played like a violin with a medical bow by distorted doctor-

puppets who made their living musical instruments scream Gothic melodies to a bored-looking audience of idle rich.

He mentally flipped through women's magazines that convinced young women that facelessness was sexy, and provided easy-to-follow directions to slowly shave your face off over the course of two years, with minimal suffering.

He knew there existed strange black Catholic machines designed to amplify fear and guilt somehow using only a religious version of basic mechanics. These machines were the size of a city block, and looked like a dark warehouse full of black metal spiders, ladders, pendulums, conveyor belts, huge cog wheels, and crucifix-shaped triphammers. The fifty or sixty foot tall spiders did a horribly wrong-looking backward dance as they worked, resulting in hundreds of crucifix triphammers tapping out complex rhythms that seemed to set the tempo for the spiders' dance. This rhythm had something to do with chaos theory, and resulted in the amplification of fear and guilt for dozens of miles around it. The inner walls seemed to be made by mixing the bodies of genetically defective children and chunks of broken stained glass windows with a pinkish concrete. Apparently, these machines existed underground, just outside several major cities in North America and Europe.

Then came the idea that a state of mind exists in which it is a really good idea to go into a kitchen, grab a steak knife or a pair of shears, and autocastrate. This idea went happily hand-in-hand with the idea that every state of mind is readily available to anyone, given the right conditions or circumstances.

Then he agonized over the existence of a cult of self-mutilating albino children with pocketfuls of itchy brown souls who only communicated by whispering riddles that would drive you suicidally insane if you ever heard one.

Then there was the highly addictive drug that puts its users through unimaginable psychic suffering for five hours, while giving them a physical facade of absolute ecstatic bliss during the ordeal, and then altering their memories during the come-down to make them remember five hours of ecstasy, which they would then describe to others in the highest possible regard, thus spreading its popularity.

[there was also the possibility that Howard had ingested such a drug ...]

There were sentient tumors, which grew on heavy machinery such as food canning machinery, car-building robotics, and airplane landing gear. The consciousness the tumors possessed was networked [i.e. one gestalt consciousness with many individual manifestations.] The consciousness was highly artistic, but unfortunately, its idea of the most sophisticated art was centered on causing mass human deaths in original and creative ways.

There was a common English word that caused a living being at random to suffer to death whenever it was spoken, but nobody knew which word it was, and it was impossible to test.

There was a cult of ghosts that everyone could see. The ghosts were extremely miscreant and cruel to the living. To join the cult, you had to commit an atrocity against humanity and then commit a violent suicide. The cult was discovered when a little girl in Warsaw saw Hitler in the shower with her...

This happened to Howard for about three hours before he managed to wrench himself back out of it by learning true objectivity and desperately integrating it into his belief system. Suddenly, he couldn't even understand what had been bothering him about the intensely clear visualizations. *In fact, to the truly objective, he realized, the only pleasures are novelty and anomaly. Neat.* He washed down a handful of vitamin C with a couple of pints of Guinness, and collapsed through his futon into a brutally violent – though quite impartial dreamscape. Visions of vicious, gory land battles ushered him gently and pleasantly into the deeper delta states.

In the street outside Howard's apartment, a small gathering of psychotic-eyed hippies in grey cotton tunics was forming. They were all staring up at Howard's window and holding hands in silent awe. The Palmers of Light thought, collectively: "It is beginning. The Silent Sleeper awakens."

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And the Palmers read it aloud in the street below  
just as you are reading it right now:

**And from that brutally violent dreamscape  
awoke a man who had the power to see through the veil.  
A hierophant of metaphysics who could directly witness  
the universe as it actually appeared.**

And for the three hours during which most sentient  
beings in America were sitting dumbfounded before a  
screen full of invasive advertising, Howard wept in awe of  
true objective reality. And now, having endured the drug's  
merciless psychic rites of passage, he righteously earned  
one sixth of his permanent citizenship in that most elusive  
of all realities, the Other Place.

And likewise, one-sixth of mundane reality was  
undone.

Amen.

- from *The Book Of Howard*

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## Chapter Six

"A lucid dream is a dream in which your mind wakes into alert consciousness, but your body and physical senses remain asleep and dreaming... you become conscious within a dream. This is usually triggered by the realization that the dream-reality in which you're immersed is impossible. You tell yourself something like, "...but my spare penis never spoke a word of Ojibway in its life! I must be dreaming," and suddenly you are conscious, and yet still dreaming somehow.

At this point, a person with a clear, strong mind can do anything they feel like with the fabric of that reality. This can be so exhilarating that the rush sometimes startles the lucid dreamer awake. Lucid, you will find you can make things appear and disappear; fly; have savage jungle sex with anyone you've ever met or can possibly imagine; duel against Musashi, O Sensei, or Bruce Lee; invent hard alien drugs and experiment with them; and so on, and so on, and so on...

*Thy will be done.*

The ability to recognize Dreamtime when it's in effect is a **trainable skill**. Mystics like Howard have found

lucidity to be the ideal environment for deep, introspective meditation... a temple whose very architecture shifts with your moods and ideations."

*- Palmers of Light publication. Author unknown.*

Nyn, on the other hand, was taught at age eighteen to lucid dream 98% of the time. *Why waste six hours of your morning being unconscious when you can be practicing stealth, acrobatics, tactical entry, combat, countersurveillance, counter-terrorism and assassination?* To Nod operatives, the idiom "eat, sleep & breathe the art of death," was no hyperbole.

Nyn was dreaming, but not lucid. This was as irregular as an all-pork diet.

He wasn't even dreaming about anything to do with his work. Had he been conscious, he would have scoffed in absolute disgust at the airy-fairy waste of six hours to which he was an unwitting accomplice. Absolute nonsense. It was a collage of cryptic symbolism with no continuity and not even a decent set of physical laws to trust.

*Something about a Sun King in a long shining white robe with a big golden sun-head mask who wanted to cut out some virgin girl's heart with his big blunt knife so that he could eat it. The thing is, the Sun King guy didn't have proper bus fare and couldn't make it to her end of the Mongolian village in time, and so he had to enter this contest called Peen Rosy Peen. PRP is some ancient dark ages game where an entire city street is flooded by digging a canal to the ocean, and the dead end of the city street is a towering, deadly waterfall. The current is insanely powerful, and the players compete by fighting against the current and each other, trying not to end up going over the waterfall.*



*The last man alive wins bus tickets. The Sun King's huge golden mask gives him the extra weight he needs to fight the current, and he wins, but the bus tickets are for the TTC and he's in Mongolia during the Dark Ages, and there's broken glass and cobwebs everywhere ...*

Nyn's consciousness awoke as he thought to himself in utter disgust: *This is such fucking bullshit!*

He was lucid. He willed the entire absurd scene into nonexistence. *Wipe it clean. Show me a high-security weapons depot with genmod dogs, nine Koga clan sentries and two squads of Poison Palm guards. Oh, and ultrasonics.*

The slate wiped itself clean, but then there he was in the Australian Outback, with a gold-masked Sun King still wandering around armed with his primitive surgical weapon, looking for Mongolian bus tickets.

*What the - ?* He shouted out to the Sun King, annoyed: "Hey! Get the fuck out of my dream, asshole!"

The Sun King silently approached him, not moving smoothly, but in creepy, spastic jumps like film editing mistakes.

Nyn turned on the Command Presence. "You are about to have a serious problem, sir." *No effect.* For the first time since being outnumbered five to one by some pissed off 47 Ronin kenshi four years earlier, Nyn's command of the situation started to slip. He tried to think in tactical terms but there were no isomers for this situation.

"Think I'm scared of you, goldenhead?" Nyn willed a white hot twelve-foot-long bastard sword into his hand. *Oh yeah, baby, come get some.* But it didn't appear. *Alright,*

*this is fucked. Seriously.* Nyn desperately switched from instinct, which wasn't working, to intellect.

"Okay, look, what do you want?" He tried hard to wake up. Not being in total, relaxed control of everything around him was the last thing Nyn was used to experiencing, and it was making him want to kill.

The Sun King looked at him through the Golden mask's empty, slack-jawed gaze, and went: Tick. Tick. Tick.

Nyn summoned up as much of his will as he could muster, focusing every ounce of psychic shit-together he had into the three inches behind his eyes. He clenched his fists and roared out in a voice so dominating that the tone and pitch fell two octaves and slowed down the flow of time around them:

"This is **MY** head and you will do exactly as I say!"

Remembering a lesson in psychic combat that Nod had adapted from Senoi Indians, he willed the Sun King to his knees and demanded a gift to pay for the rudeness of the intrusion.

"You will give me a gift, for the trespass you have committed has greatly offended me. You are confined within my mind and I have the power to destroy you. I demand a gift." *Yeah. Who's your daddy, biatch?*

The Sun King did not move. Nyn escalated his aggression.

"Awww, what's the matter, sunshine? Did Phaeton wreck up your hot wheels last night; now you gotta take the bus?" He enunciated for effect, "Give me a gift or suffer the consequences."

The Sun King instantly produced a small white box and held it out with both mehndi-tattooed hands.

Nyn erased the Sun King from his mind and caught the box in mid-air. It was wooden, with black paint that labeled it "Box A." He undid the latch and opened it. Inside was a similar black box, labeled with white paint, "Box B." He took it out and stared at it for a long time, trying to figure out how a box that seemed to be exactly the same dimensions as Box A had managed to fit inside Box A. *Wait, where did Box A Go?* He wanted to compare the two, but Box A was gone. He opened up Box B. It contained Box A. He examined Box A. It was exactly the same Box A that he had lost, right down to the flaws in the paint that labeled it. He looked around and could not locate Box B. He knew he would find it inside Box A, but could not remember ever letting go of it in the first place. Bizarre. This time, he was going to keep track of both boxes. He knew a box wasn't going to disappear before his very eyes. Not in **HIS** Dreamtime. Not while **HE** was lucid ...

He opened box A. He carefully removed Box B, maintaining awareness of both boxes with his eyes and hands. One in each hand; both in his field of vision. Yes, they were both exactly the same size. But Box B didn't visibly grow, nor did A visibly shrink. He wondered if he could fit Box B back into Box A. But he had closed Box A, and couldn't open it again without freeing enough fingers to drop one. He placed Box B under his arm like a newspaper, fumbled, and somehow dropped it back into Box A.

This routine, and Nyn's total obsession with it, ushered him back into the fog; his lucid reality gently folding itself into the warm fuzzy bliss of unconscious dreaming. The Man in White had effected an ingenious escape.

\* \* \*

Antonin's assassin-name was Nyn because it was shorter and sounded less Euro. In fact, his name wasn't Euro at all, but what the fuck did the agency care, right? "Antonin" was a combination of three root words; "an" - meaning "death," "to" - meaning "sword," and "nin" - meaning "stealth." At least that's what his mentors told him. He was a relegated K'an Monastery orphan, (or as he bittersweetly called himself, a "bastard-chile-in-exile".) He was unsure of his origins before that, but he liked that particular explanation best and stuck with it. Although Nyn spoke in many convincing accents, his unmodified speaking voice was a bizarre vocal Euro-caricature of Spanish, French and Turkish dialects. When he graduated from the Nod academy, they changed his name to Nyn. It was alright. Antonin had always hoped they would give him a supercool assassin name like the legendary Dualizm-6 ("*six million ways to separate the mind from the body; choose one.*") But at the time, Nod's naming convention had moved on from guys with pronounced middle names (John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald), to conspicuously generic names (John Smith, Jane Doe), to gamer names (Dualizm-9, SylenT-ZeRo), and then with the advent of ARCH, to monosyllabic palindromes using only the letter Y as a vowel (Nyn, Sys, Lyl, Pyp, Tyt...) At least he kept the "stealth" part of his name, which was what he was best at. His mentors always said he was a natural born assassin, though he bore none of the prophetic tattoo-like birthmarks of the Hashisheen, and neither had he ever spoken a single word of Eblaite, Elamite, or even Hittite in the cradle. Still, they took him in and certainly did not make an error of omission. Nyn turned out to be a master ops strategist and theoretician. He invented the now canonized isomer theory, and they teach his Zen angle on effort-free lockpicking to

all first year fedayeen.

Now, there are two kinds of assassin - those who are programmed to do anything on command, and those who love their work, excel at it, and operate autonomously. Or, at least that's what they tell their agents to get them to do two different kinds of work for them.

The first kind of assassin, the Bloody Fist, is *fedayeen*, basically a suicidal attack dog. The proper title for Bloody Fist operatives is "soldiers," as opposed to "assassins" ; a term reserved for the elite agents of Nod. Bloody Fist soldiers' heads are so full of conditioning and company propaganda that they are literally operated by remote control. Candidates whose psychological screening indicates that they will follow any order, no matter how irrational, without involving hesitation-inducing personal values or survival instincts are those who will make it into the ranks of Bloody Fist. Soldiers' personalities are all but annulled during training, which makes them inconspicuously boring and socially dulled. Edgeless. Just like your neighbors. Selected candidates are fairly intelligent, but the sum total of that intelligence goes directly into the logistics of the job and getting it done as efficiently as possible. Philosophy never crosses their minds, unless it's in the mark's psych profile. Off the job, they live lives designed by census polls. Average car, average house, average clothing, average TV shows. Then, one day, the operative gets an encrypted email at their nym.alias.net account, bounced off a chain of Type-II Cypherpunk and Mixmaster remailers. Nothing but a name, location, timeframe, threat / security assessment, profile, and of course, the location of the public locker containing the offshore credit card - the operative's equipment budget. This is all encrypted to the pseudonym's military strength 2048-bit DSS public key. He memorizes

the contents of the email, then wipes it with the DoD standard ten passes of random data and a wipe of his swapfile. The operative placidly drives his beige Volvo downtown and puts a fine selection of climbing gear, hardware, tools, military surplus, chemicals and a rental vehicle on the company card. A demagnetizer and a propane torch are applied to the credit card after use. Bank licenses in the Caribbean are ridiculously easy to come by; even Joe Denominator can have his own legitimate Caribbean bank for a \$4000 licensing fee. After completion of a job, payment is wired to the operative's account at a Caribbean bank which is owned and operated by Nod. Remote control.

Now, the agency could give a fuck if a Bloody Fist gets caught or killed. They're soldiers. They are plentiful, easy to train, immune to interrogation, 100% loyal, and 100% expendable. The Bloody Fist, as a rule, don't know anything. All they do is live a menial, shitty life and watch menial, shitty television until they get an email. They don't know anything except who, where and when. Their training does the rest automatically.

Sometimes, Nod will sick two or three Bloody Fist on a single mark, knowing that at least one will succeed, even though security will probably take out all three in the end. This is Samurai warfare, very much a product of ARCH, and this scenario is usually the case with high-profile, low importance marks.

They would never waste Nod like that. Nod happens to mission critical marks. Nod never fails, never gets caught, and never gets killed. As the company-written saying goes, **"All loyal assassins will retire to a paradise of luxurious food, hashish and wine, music, rare birds, highly trained angel-servants and fairy-concubines to cater to your every whim."** They say an agent's thirteenth job is their retirement hit. A low-profile, critical-importance mark. Agents are given a key to wear around their neck

during their final mission. The key is rumored to unlock this mythic paradise of wine, drugs, catering, music and pussy. All agents successfully completing mission thirteen retire to this heaven-somewhere-on-earth where they can lie in the well-endowed lap of hedonistic luxury on Nod's tab for the rest of their years. A place where they can finally relax, play, imagine and create, safe from the myriad powerful enemies they'd undoubtedly made over the course of their training and fast-track career.

Nod agents get paid five times what Bloody Fist make, and they get their equipment wholesale from one of three underground warehouses in North America at three times Bloody Fist's budget. Nod agents actually all know each other, are involved in Nod's decision-making processes, and even have the time and luxury of contracting themselves out to mafias, markets and multinationals on company time and slush budget whenever Nod's business is slow. Nod operatives even occasionally use Bloody Fist as equipment.

Agents of Nod, in an advanced stage of their training, must learn to dispatch real, live humans; albeit ones who are expecting to be killed. Because of a piggybacked loophole in a relatively stealthy bill dealing with euthanasia, someone who wishes to commit suicide can opt to be professionally assassinated by Nod initiates, if they can prove adequate suffering to a lawyer and a three-person psychological evaluation panel. This process allows them to obtain a waiver package, which they can scan, encrypt and email to a pseudonymous middleman for Nod. At that point, the operatives in training begin their research on the 'suicide' and eventually 'assist' it. This actually turns out to be an excellent deal for those who feel their life definitely needs to end, who but lack the courage or the willpower, or alternately, who have religious fears of going to a nasty

afterlife if they commit suicide. Plus, the suicides don't know when or how they will die, so they tend to obtain a great sense of adventure and action from all this... most find a renewed vigor and become born again lovers of life shortly before being assassinated. Living a near-death experience will do that to you. Some also get off on the novelty of going out like someone important and being killed in a rare and professional way.

Bloody Fist training / indoctrination is a savage gauntlet along the same lines as Navy SEAL training, fraternities, Zen monasteries, certain hard style dojos and many other successful cults. Based on an extremely effective and simple behavioral psychology principle, the idea is that if the candidate's mind and body are forced to endure humiliation, suffering, exhaustion, starvation and group psychological deconstruction in order to become part of an exclusive, elite social group, then its psychological attachment and identification with the group will be fierce and abject if it succeeds. The more humiliating and subordinating the rite of passage, the stronger the imprint. This process also screens out and separates two classes of successful candidates. The Bloody Fist types, which turns out to be pretty much everyone, and the Nod assassins, who are one out of every ten thousand recruits.

Nyn was snatched up by Nod just before he got fucked in the head. This is Nod's usual recruiting procedure. Nyn was the one in a thousand who passed the psych screening but asked too many questions, albeit the right ones, and who got dramatically pulled aside one day, never to be seen again. They tell the rest of the class that people who ask questions tend to disappear like that. Then they fuck them in the head.

Everyone learns how to pick locks, car bomb, poison, rappel, stab, stalk, strangle and disappear. But Nyn got the expensive training. Nyn got to play with smart blades and



botulism. Microwave and laser surveillance. How to anonymize a corpse with nothing but homemade thermite and a Leatherman tool. Contact poisons delivered by water pistols on rainy days. Nyn's favorite Nod skill was always time dilation; the ability to establish and maintain an increased perceptual framerate, effectively dilating time during combat for up to five minutes. (The life or death phase of an uncomplicated assassination typically runs between two seconds and two minutes.) It was unfortunately true that, like many Nod skills, sustained time dilation really did overclock your brain and burn it out a bit faster, but Nod indoctrination maintained that it was always worth it to burn a little myelin for the Team. The big secret behind most of Nod's unique agent skills was the use of the drug THC during training. Besides being exceptional catalysts to certain assassination skills, THC gave Nod agents the ability to pay lots and LOTS of attention to any particular biofunction; to locate, analyze, understand, drop anchor and carefully influence just about any function of which their brains and bodies were capable. Agents did most of their training higher than Terence McKenna at an ayahuasca ritual. And it works.

The first fundamental principle that Nyn learned was the **beast vs. will** principle. According to Nod methodology, a human being is motivated to action by one of two stimuli: Beast and will.

Beast is basically instinct, and includes eating when you're hungry, running or fighting when you're threatened, pulling your hand away from a hot burner, trying to get laid, and so on. Will is conscious choice, rational intellect, and that which has the ability to override beast.

This principle is important in all military and paramilitary applications, because

you need to somehow train your soldiers to run towards, and not away from certain death. You can accomplish this if you teach them that their wills should always be in control of their beasts, and then indoctrinate the fuck out of their wills with orders, priorities and protocols.

Beast is almost equally important to develop. Without beast, nobody ever feels like grabbing some stranger's head and bashing it against something hard until it gets soft, for example. But beast is also the voice that tells you you're going to die if you don't run, and hence the tactical importance of cultivating an all-powerful will.

The simplest test for this is to get your assassins-in-training to try to hold their breath until they pass out. When they can do this, their will has proven itself to be more powerful than their beast. The hashish also helps immensely.

\* \* \*

Nyn bitterly awoke and immediately changed his breathing pattern and biometrics to induce Alpha State... a trick agents use to achieve instant waking alertness. *What the hell went wrong with that training session? That definitely should not have happened. It was like someone else was dreaming my dream with me.* Nyn reached into the nightstand drawer and procured a pair of his trademark disposable all-black contact lenses... a convenience Nyn never left home without. Wearing nonreflective all-black contacts concealed gaze direction, foiled most eye-based lie detection methods, prevented those fucking passive retinal scanners everywhere from logging your movement and location, and the featureless eyes made your face much more difficult to identify. He got up and mechanically went to the bathroom, feeling the ghosts of eleven near-death injuries as he moved. He brushed his teeth, washed the inky blue word "nimble" off the back of his

hand, thought for a minute, and wrote "iai" in its place while he tried patiently and methodically to predict the course and details of his entire day.

With the onset of this so-called 'renaissance' bullshit, work had been unusually hectic. The job and its profound lack of ethics had been getting past the indoctrination's defenses to Nyn's nervous system. His beast and will were starting to deprogram themselves and he was just starting to feel alien twinges of guilt over the sort of work he did and especially over the reasons why he was out there, every day, meticulously engineering the deaths of mere cultural innovators. So basically he was in Teedot on mandatory chill leave looking for freelance work to keep his deeply engrained killing instincts occupied. Shitwork was like a vacation to a workaholic like Nyn. He might even be willing to sink as low as posting his Nod-logoed vcard on the local BlackNet, which usually meant collecting minor drug debts, intimidating prominent gang leaders and supervising illicit deals between amateur thugs. Teedot was an excellent choice for finding shitwork like that. If anyone actually believed that his logo was legit, he could charge a small fortune for his services, and the work would be simplistic thug nonsense he could do in his sleep. *Or could I, still?*

## Chapter Seven

Ever have one of those mind-cracking experiences that permanently changes the way you perceive reality and/or interpret its sensory data? It makes too much sense at once and your awareness kisses the lips of madness for one exquisite overstimulated second? Those lips are the blarney stone of madmen, shamen, junkies... to kiss them may require perilous and awkward prostration, but when that opportunity presents itself, kiss full and kiss long... merely dabbling in madness is intellectual suicide. You can't just *wade* in a bottomless pool full of divers being torn apart by their own ideological piranha. You have to dive too. This is a necessary leap of faith, like the relaxing of an orifice to facilitate penetration. If you dive too stiff or too loose, you bail and get devoured by your own uncertainties and paradoxes. If you hold back and kiss madness without completely surrendering reason, that reason will be bitten, torn, infected, intoxicated by the dissociative honey on her lips. Identify your consciousness as an asshole with logic, reason, modeling, assumptions, values, rules and laws as its sphincter muscle. This muscle must be relaxed and lubricated in preparation for what

madness has to offer, or the whole will suffer rather  
uncomfortable trauma.

*- From a Palmers of Light propaganda flyer promoting  
widespread Fantasy use.*

*(Spokespersons for the Palmers officially deny any involvement in the creation of this  
flyer, and they claim it was actually written by a nonexistent intelligence agency called  
“Nod” to defame, discredit, implicate and character assassinate them.)*

\* \* \*

Before the renaissance, so-called *square* consciousness had immense sociological  
and political influence across the board. This is believed to have been doubly true due to  
the vast majority of aging conservatives at the time who, still possessed by the second  
generation value-system meme-viruses of the 1950s and 60s, were instinctively fighting  
like hell to indoctrinate their preceding generation before it created its own precedent  
generation, indoctrinated it with its own values, and then died off having suckered no one  
with their *sell out, work hard, tell lies and look good* stratagem.

The dominators had declared war on most “recreational” anything, especially  
chemistry, and particularly naturally growing entheogens, since studies discovered that  
they tended to steer young people away from wanting to become soldiers and police  
officers, and generally aroused a **fascination with the ordinary**; a freely available source

of pleasure which the entertainment industries could never patent, monopolize and sell back to the people. But the real story was slightly more sinister: there were certain destabilizing, empowering concepts that no one was supposed to realize, and yet, certain drugs tended to make people realize exactly those things while paying lots and lots of objective attention to the extremely ordinary. Therefore, many mechanisms were selfbuilt right into the architecture of human existence to distract and occupy consciousness as much as possible. To encourage docility and unreasonable obedience. To confine, restrict, weaken and direct their free wills as much as possible.

Sharing was illegal. Free entertainment was a crime, and those urban shamans who still had the sack to journey within using demented plant, critter and fungus spirits as their guides... they were no longer respected as medicine men or mystics among the elders or even the hunters of their tribes... they were outcast and their shamanism had to be conducted in secret, in constant fear of losing everything they had to the violent and faceless agents of a system that stood fiercely between them and unfiltered reality.

In short, the drug war was a square consciousness versus circular consciousness war, and in many cases not so much a *class* war as a *cultural* war. Antitribalism. Those who sport visible tribal rites of passage may not earn salaries, except sometimes as telemarketers, couriers and music store clerks. Reject your urban tribalism or live in an economic prison. It was like that and no one but the Dominators could afford the lawyers to change it. Plus, square consciousness had the cops to brutally enforce their profit-or-die agendas; giant sadistic apes full of steroids, propaganda, righteousness-fueled hatred; ready to gleefully torture you with less-lethal pepper and electrical weaponry; more than

happy to let their vicious dog loose and tell bad jokes to a ziptied Gandhian while it eats the poor unwashed passive resistor's calf for breakfast.

Anyone or anything not devoted to an agenda of profit had a formidable enemy.

\* \* \*

Although there was no such agency as Nod, it was the ultimate manifestation of this spiritual cold war... the psychedelic diaspora versus whatever the fuck kind of shadow government bastard child Nod was. Nod seemed to be some kind of covert revolution control agency whose job it was to subvert the mass consciousness of the underground, and to make paranoia-inducing examples of its charismatic icons by arranging for bizarre and rare terminal medical conditions, vomit asphyxiation, and/or messy high-profile gunshot wounds to accidentally happen to friendly shamans, mystics and bards who'd grown too popular... who'd influenced too many other minds. Nod *hadn't existed* for a long, long time, despite its hyperactive intervention in the cultural cold war.

At the same time, and by twin miracles of fate and biochemical engineering, a small group of blackballed biochemists founded the massively popular **Cult of the Other Place**. These three geniuses had been disavowed by the scientific community for unethical, unscientific and “quack” research, (respectively.) They found each other through their common interest in developing new mind-expanding entheogenic chemistry for the world, which hadn't been done in decades. These three men would work together and produce a drug that “would turn many sleepers into gods.”

The three scientists were privately funded by a handful of pseudonymous patrons – wealthy ascribers to the cause – and after only thirteen months of lavishly equipped and

funded labwork, and clone testing of course, they gave L-Pseudomescaline Tryptamol, a.k.a. "Fantasy," to the world... the most powerful true hallucinogen known to date.

Fantasy shows its users an alternate reality *superimposed* on the reality they're used to. In low doses, you get fleeting glimpses, shadows, aftereffects and flashes of this reality. You might see what looks like ghosts and transparent buildings, or even clearer images in your peripheral vision. Moderate doses make all of this even clearer and easier to perceive directly. It also incorporates the other senses, except for touch. You can actually smell the translucent flowers that grow out of the real world concrete, you can hear real conversations in solemn, forbidden-sounding tongues, taste all the succulent and colorful fruits, and so on. And there's no way your consciousness is just making it all up... it's obvious when you're experiencing it that you're bearing witness to a whole *Other Place*, right on top of this one, whose governing mathematics, physics and geometry is a millionfold more elegant than our own. High doses incorporate touch as well, and the alternate reality becomes about 80% clear, with mundane reality only about 20% clear. Attack doses permanently alter your brain's neural chemistry and pathways such that, once you come down from the 100% alternate reality, you are henceforth *always* experiencing the full effects of a low dose without actually using the chemical. Subsequent attack doses etch even more committed neural circuitry, making the permanent effects clearer and stronger. It has become a rule of thumb that six attack doses will permanently transcend you to the Other Place with *no further need of the chemical*.

This wouldn't have become a cult, at least not in North America, if it weren't for one extreme peculiarity that had the scientific community squirming and gagging:



You can take two complete strangers who have never heard of or used the drug before, give them both moderately high doses, put them each separately in a common location that neither subject has ever before visited, and both subjects will describe identical hallucinations.

As if it weren't enough damage to the status quo that subject X described the same blue-skinned, ten-faced, sceptre-wielding being as subject Y and subject Z... in the same observation lab, a now famous experiment had most canonized scientists squirming indignantly in their graves. Subject A found a hallucinatory quill pen and wrote a poem about a spider trapped in an hourglass on page 34 of a wedding guest book in some Gothic cathedral in an empty field in Virginia. An isolated subject B was then dosed and brought to the same field. Subject B described the cathedral in detail, went inside, found the guest book, and was instructed to flip through it and read it out loud. After reading out several surreal entries with strange, otherworldly names, subject B read out subject A's spider poem word for word, and when asked for the page number, replied, "Thirty-four."

The NSA, CIA, FBI, DOD, and two other sinister acronyms jumped all over it for its espionage potential. But ironically, high ranking and/or senior operatives found almost no effects whatsoever using the drug, the university professors the agencies hired to decipher the boxes all tried to steal them, and the junior recruits all dropped out of government service and chose alternate careers after just one or two doses. It seems the drug had little effect on typically aggressive, violent, immoral or dishonest individuals, and it seemed to forcibly remove those traits from those who possessed them to lesser degrees. It was also discovered that its combined effects on individuals with acute

schizophrenia were very unpredictable, usually disastrous, and tended to attract Nod intervention for some reason.

One of the first schizophrenics tested with LPMT by the FDA darkside, a patient dubbed "NIGWIM0001," immediately lost all ability to distinguish between dreams and waking reality, bit one of his researchers to death, and escaped. Urban legends have a Nigwim-1 loose in every major city, randomly serial killing and fucking with peoples' dreams. But the Nigwim-1 mythos, along with anything 'spiritual' attached to the effects of LPMT, are what science calls "folk superstition"; their way of patting you on the head and holding back derisive laughter. On the other hand, this murder, hysteria, occult and madness angle is obviously useful to the prohibition people, since it justifies every imaginable rights infringement committed in the name of keeping Fantasy off the children-and-victim-filled streets of America.

Fantasy's manufacture was a well-kept secret, impossible to reverse-engineer, and since its engineers were its only existing source, they became instant millionaires. Knowing that a drug which nurtured peaceful, honest, nonviolent, conflict-free personalities and made people generally disenchanted with the survival routines of mundane, commonplace reality – anticipating that such a “dangerous” drug would rise to become the most highly criminalized substance in American history, they immediately made high-priced deals with Mexico, Austria and Taza (The Temporary Autonomous Zone of Amsterdam) to guarantee its legal production and distribution in those nations. Each of the three scientists moved to one of the three amnesty countries and became overnight spiritual leaders there.

Fantasy's hallucinogenic consistency led people to believe that its alternate reality was a real and holy one, and since they could only get LPMT from one of three men, he was their gatekeeper and shepherd. Rituals and hierarchies were developed. Attack dose ceremonies were created to take initiates one stage closer to True Reality. Some theorized that the beings in the Other Place were the souls of the dead, taking on whatever form they preferred. Others fancied that they were beings from other parts of the universe who had also been fully dosed into the alternate reality. Eventually, the Other Place's architecture was discovered to be mentally projected. Fully transmigrated cultists found that they could alter their appearances however they willed, although this was only visible to other cultists and users. Buildings could be created in the same manner, and imaginative cultists erected massive temples of crystal and gemstone through sheer creative will.

Most cultists flocked together geographically, gathering in Mexico, Austria and Taza. But many returned to North America in order to explore it after they had no more need of the highly illegal chemical, and therefore were not breaking any laws by simply living out their lifestyles, which was a common problem in America. (Just ask any gay Texan.)

A hedon is a standard measurable unit of pleasure. When you hear Palmers talk about the attack dose rituals, you will hear the phrase "Heaven and Hell." Although the experience could never be objectively described, hedons can be measured. The second three hours of an attack dose of Fantasy is the Heaven the Palmers refer to. It is also the Heaven of the divine concubines described as *houris* in the ancient texts of the Hashisheen. It is *also* the internetworking of individualized consciousness with all

consciousness. It is the spontaneous recrystallization of one's awareness as a more complex and evolved process. It is said that true transcendental enlightenment of this nature registers an infinite feedback of hedons. Channeling infinite bliss; allowing oneself to be transformed by the experience. A dolor is a standard measurable unit of pain. The first three hours after the onset of an attack dose ritual are the Hell of which the Palmers speak. They say it reaches deep into your subconscious, even deeper into your very soul and essence, digs out the most horrific entities it can find, and holds down your consciousness and forces you to confront it all. LPMT Hell induces deep subconscious vomiting to fully cleanse the mind of conflict and repression. In theory, LPMT inflicts infinite dolor feedback on its attack dosers for three hours. Many Buddhists and neo-Theravadans claim that if the mind is blank; free from repressions and conflict and guilt and fear and free from all distinctions - that pain, like anything else, even *infinite* pain, will pass right through it with nothing to cling to. After the fifth time, one or two transcendents have managed to pass these three hours in perfect tranquility. It is hoped that a technique will one day be developed to help all transcendents run this psychic gauntlet painlessly. Any conflicts or repressions or attachments will be destroyed by contact with three hours of full attention under infinite dolor, and the more one clings to that which burns, the more one burns. Subconscious attrition.

LPMT became the first drug in America to merit a death sentence for first time possession in personal use quantities. The rationale behind Fantasy's death sentence was that it was proven in court that the chemical had the potential to be used contrary to section 420.6.9 of the New Criminal Code, the highest-ranking offense in the new revision of the law, "Successful Self-Evolution." Punishment for successful self-

evolution was extremely drastic and fabulously expensive, though the media conglomerates always ended up making a gluttonous mountain of cash for the financially insatiable drug war by providing primetime televised coverage, complete with commercial sponsorship. If it could be proven by a panel of court-ordered geneticists that you had somehow managed to self-evolve, you would be subjected to an inquisition-like interrogation process; first to confess it, then to admit you were wrong, then to describe to a panel of PhDs exactly how you managed to do it in excruciating detail. After the interrogation process, you would be sprayed head to toe with a kind of superglue and packed into the fetal position, then encased in a hundred pound non-biodegradable polymer egg and jettisoned out of Earth's orbit to ensure that your molecules and DNA will never, ever be recycled into Earth's ecosystem.

Typically, there is a big flag-waving, baby-groping, speech-making ceremony, and sometimes a horrifically preserved Charlton Heston shows up medically merged with his signature red and gold replica Roman chariot, whose biomechanical pumps and tubing penetrate every natural and manmade orifice but his mouth, which to this day is still bitching about ARCH.

## Chapter Eight

S2(P8-12)+S3(P13).

Attack dose #2.

Every day since I first ingested this drug, I've been remembering - in vivid experiential detail – at least one to three dreams that I *know* I had when I was a kid ... dreams I dreamt during the mysterious life I lived before whatever caused my amnesia. Dreams normal people would assume long forgotten; doubly so on account of the amnesia in my case. And yet I'm sure that I'm vividly remembering these dreams for the first time since I dreamed them as a small child.

I went into this second attack dose thinking that the first attack dose's gift of true objectivity would allow me to tame the first three hours of this drug's trial by psychic agony. I was wrong. Unfortunately, I cannot continue taking notes, as the revolting sound of the pen nib on the paper is giving me vertigo. As long as it doesn't kill me, it will all be worth it...

And the violent white noise of nothingness screamed Howard awake all night.

His eyes burn. If he closes his eyes for more than a few seconds, it will get inside his head. The noise; the awful car-wreck dental-drill screaming-children noise will infiltrate his head from outside and it will scream its atrocities at him forever and it will never stop and it will never go away.

*The sound of the gag reflex. The sound of the drunk husband abusing and berating his wife. The sound of her sobbing through blood and broken molars.*

His eyes burn. They feel red and bloodshot. He cautiously shuts his eyelids for a second to relieve the icky throbbing feeling in his eyeballs and the noise all of a sudden becomes crystal clear. You can go for weeks with blocked ears full of wax, thinking that what you hear is clear and normal. Then one day you yawn and your ears pop and your hearing suddenly improves by 250%. This is what happens every time he closes his eyes. Except, all the sounds are violent and trying to rape him.

*The sound of human bone fracture. The sound of epileptic seizure.*

He feels the sound reflecting off the walls, distorting in electric light, slithering through the carpet fibers, coagulating near sources of heat, getting trapped in the corners of his room, building in volume and intensity.

*The sound of blood vessels bursting. The sound of decayed vertebrae rubbing together. The sound of cartilage ripping.*

He hasn't slept for three days, or so he believes: it's really only been a couple of hours. The noise is too loud and random for awareness to rest. If the noises were rhythmic, he could get used to them and sleep. But if he slept, it would get inside his head. He must stay awake. He must maintain the barrier between inside and outside. He must ensure that the noise remains "other" and never ever becomes "same". If it filters

through into his head, he becomes its originator. It will come from within. He would think about what that means, but the noise is too distracting.

*The crackling and wheezing of pneumonic lungs trying to breathe. A broken talking doll that speaks too slowly. Human teeth squealing on chalkboard against their owner's will.*

He hasn't had a consistent train of thought in ... he can't remember how long. He closes his eyes again and the noise develops mass. He feels a traumatic change in the air pressure. His ears pop. Sound waves unbalance and sway him. It squeezes his temples and the arteries in the sides of his neck. He develops a pressure headache. He senses something very dense flying towards his face, about to smash into it. He panics and opens his eyes... nothing there. He scans his apartment:

The hammer and the smashed CDs on the floor. Bloody Q-tips littered everywhere. Blankets, comforters and pillows staple-gunned to the walls and ceiling. It's freezing. He can see his breath. *The furnace roar carried the distinct sizzle of burning animals.* His fingernails are light blue and he can hear himself shaking and shivering like a speed overdose victim, trying to yell out in erratic bursts with spit and chunks of vomit flying from his frothing mouth, screaming for help unintelligibly.

*The sound of a music box, distorted as though heard underwater. The sound of clotted blood being pumped through hardened arteries.*

With all the strength he can muster, he tries to quietly stand and fails. The noise has begun systematically latching on to all of the air molecules in the room. This way, it can organize and fill all the available space in the room. It can ride the air currents into his lungs. It is beginning to infiltrate his body. He starts to panic. Breathing becomes



rapid and he takes more noise into his lungs. It must have anticipated this. The noise has an intelligence. He can't stop breathing or he will pass out and it will get inside. He must control his breathing and take in the minimum amount of air necessary to retain consciousness.

It grows louder and more violent. The room starts to contract with each inhalation, but does not expand with each exhalation. His lungs are devouring the space within the room, creating a vacuum. The more the room closes in, the more dense the sound becomes; louder, more intense, more violent.

*The sound of a surgical bone saw. The sound of drain cleaner eating stomach lining. The sound of an abortion vacuum.*

Its vibrations penetrate his skull and force its chaotic rhythms on his brain tissue. His brain begins to obey. His apartment is an oversized coffin now, shrinking. The air is hot and oxygen-deficient. Suffocating.

His head swims.

He reels and convulses with the sounds of powdered glass scraping and eroding sinuses, electroshock therapy, maggots crawling over eyeballs, the squishing and snapping of surgery.

He starts to become these sounds, and foreign, forbidden thoughts scream inside his head. He begins to realize that the sounds have always come from inside, from his head, from him. He created the noise and he is the noise. He had always been the cacophony.

Atrocity followed.

And then, since it was the only conceivable possibility of self-defense, Howard somehow wrapped his mind around nothingness.

\* \* \*

### The Other Place

Not exactly a paradise, but compared to the mundane survival routines of corporate America, infinitely close. Its real charm lies in being absolutely unpredictable and alien without being the least bit threatening or hostile. The Other Place welcomes every conscious being with abject non-prejudice; because to simply get to this plane of existence in the first place proves that the traveller's mind has been forcibly opened up by Fantasy like a psychedelic vivisection. And Humpty Dumpty is never going back together again.

A little-understood fact about all realities is that their "realness" is entirely relative to the amount of time that a consciousness spends immersed in them. Almost all realities are immediately available to any consciousness, but they seem imaginary at first, gradually developing substance, depth and, for lack of a better word, "reality," as time spent immersed in that reality passes. This applies to

all realities; from the banal eat-sleep-and-work reality which the world is accustomed to, to the reality within television shows and commercials, to the reality of war, to the various spiritual and psychedelic realities. And indeed, this is a major function of monasteries and communes - to withdraw from one reality in order to immerse oneself in an alternate, more spiritually conducive reality.

The Other Place is also subject to this phenomenon, but with two unusual characteristics. Considering that the Other Place is not normally available to any consciousness at any time; that the consciousness must usually be traumatized by madness or chemicals and have many of its most basic roots ripped from the soil of mundane reality in order to experience it, the immersion phenomenon is supernaturally quick, but more importantly - irreversible. Five to six visits make you a citizen for life, and at that point, the mundane reality in which you grew up is only experienced in nightmares and fleeting, unpleasant hallucinations.

Although scientists have proven the Other Place to have a modicum of consistency, and it does, you still never know what to expect from moment to moment. It is a richer, denser, more fantastically complex reality than ours.

This cannot be adequately explained; only experienced. But scents, for example, mean much, much more in the Other Place. Try to wrap your understanding around the idea that every packet of sensory data in the Other Place leaves its point of origin carrying six to eight times the information of similar sense data in the commonplace reality. In mundane reality, the smell of coffee often carries the information that there is coffee nearby, the relative quality and approximate age of the brew, and so on. In the Other Place, that same odor also leaves the coffee carrying information such as the mood, thoughts and emotions of the being who brewed it, the reason why it was brewed, where it came from, its spiritual and physical energy resonances, its color and temperature, how much it enjoys evaporating, its relationship with its container, its true name, and many other things about it that would not even translate into the English language. And you just automatically know all of this as you take the scent into your nostrils - no real thought or interpretation is necessary. All sensory data works like this. Colors. Shapes. Empty spaces. Sound pitches, tones of voice, and music ... fuck... suffice to say its music would reduce anyone from Mozart to Infected Mushroom to the relative musical capacity of a small, mentally

challenged child banging on an aluminum saucepan with a wooden spoon.

The relationship between the Other Place and mundane sleeper reality is one of indirect mutual influence. The actions necessary to function ordinarily in one reality simultaneously result in willful, seemingly magical influence over the other reality. Symbols, such as rapidly mutating psychedelic fungus, or giant black steel gothic cathedrals, are key... a symbol which consciousness manifests in the Other Place becomes a reality. Powerful enough symbols influence the realities they overlap, and the influenced reality is forced, by variations on all of the symbol's possible interpretations, to accommodate and reconfigure. (This is the same symbolic system used in dream interpretation, more or less.) Attention is necessary to sustain the existence of anything manifested in the Other Place. Manifestations which do not remain fed by attention tend to fade and casually undo their influence, but their configuration template may still live on in that lossy, compressed archive called memory. However, once a symbolic manifestation is gone from everyone's memory and deterministic realities no longer gently ripple in its wake, it fades from the Other Place and returns to the

infinite nothing until another consciousness conceives of it for the first time.

So we must learn that the art of reality influence is not to orchestrate specific events in reality by sheer willpower. In practice, it is much subtler than this. As Howard did, we must teach ourselves the use of attentive consciousness to create and manifest powerful symbols of our true desires in the Other Place ... symbols powerful and clear enough to flavour our mundane realities with the essence of our imaginations, and to introduce unpredictable momentum into an inert and finite deterministic system.

It becomes necessary to pull new and original events, patterns, ideas and manifestations from the infinite nothing; by means of the creative will; and feed them into a closed, deterministic universe. Otherwise, the chain reactions will eventually end, finding either equilibrium or self-destruction. A closed, deterministic reality requires energetic, symbolic influence crafted from the unpredictable creative nectars of consciousness... dreams, imagination, hallucination, madness, and so on - in order to avoid stasis and extinguishment.

Attention is the fundamental universal manifesting force. If consciousness is our operating system, attention is

its kernel. Attention is the creative force in all of us. Attention is why we cannot simply run programs like *Hypnagog* in the idle processes of unmonitored computer systems... unwitnessed trees fall silently, or, as we always say, "*uniqueness needs a witness.*"

A new concept cannot exist without conscious attention, even if it appears on a Hypnagog screen that no one is watching. Attention is why a seemingly all-powerful deity would still be in desperate need of measly humans to believe in it. Traditional faith requires an interruption in the process by so called *free will* to prove to itself - and to all who do have faith - that it freely accepts an *untestable* principle; that it is willing to reconfigure its entire system of beliefs, values and knowledge to accommodate this new and unidentified stealth virus. Attention is automatic faith in the existence of a concept. Attention is a spontaneous transference of "energy" from consciousness into the infinite Kali void like dangling bait into a singularity, fishing in the infinite zero where all unmanifested existence waits for consciousness to feed the void that pattern of attentive energy. And thus it will manifest in the Other Place as fully realized existence in the immediate vicinity of the consciousness that created it, the Other Place will

reconfigure and adapt to accommodate this new manifestation, and its influences, both locally and universally, will directly influence the realities it overlaps. *"Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven."* Use reality influence wisely and rarely. Too much intentional disturbance will tear your sanity apart with all the inconsistencies you create around you. The Palmers would have you generate concepts completely at random to feed to your conscious attention and manifest in the Other Place. Cultists tend to observe this practice somewhat like pollution, and would prefer a more ritualized, controlled environment.

Most think of LPMT's window to the Other place as a method of glimpsing a provably real alternate reality. That version contains all the information the media wants you to have, but the wise know what awesome powers of reality engineering this drug bestows to those who can tame three hours of Hell on six different occasions. Most initiates work up to each successive ritual over the course of a couple of years, especially considering the solving of each crypto-geometrical cube surface to extract the capsules for the ritual... each surface takes most geniuses at least several months to merely wrap their heads around the fundamental



concepts required to solve them.      -From *The Book of*  
*Howard,*

*“Master Lu’s Waxations Metaphysical”*

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Howard had no time for long and unnecessary psychological limbering up. He had learned the second set of cryptosurface lessons with ease, having once written "the" textbook on modern methods of algorithmic cryptanalysis. And here he was taking another six pills the morning after having traumatized his psyche with the *previous* night's six pills... total time for extraction of S2(P1-6) - two hours, thirty-four minutes. By the time his intellect managed to make all the strange neural connections necessary to understand the sixth puzzle of surface two (S2), his brain felt peeled back, exposed and forced to endure a dry rape of alien information, logic and perception... There was nothing to know, or do, or communicate. There was only attention.

Howard-mind razed and reconstructed itself.

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## Chapter Nine

*The art of stealth is to move without being noticed.*

*The art of infiltration is to stealthily enter restricted three-dimensional spaces.*

### ***Kage Clan tenet #1***

Talia's brainwave cycles were running at the top of the alpha spectrum, accelerated by ephedrine and adrenaline, or as she always called it, "ephedrenaline." Her experience was being amplified by the wax genius of DJ Kinjo, who was assaulting her audio sensorium through her Oggman with the darkest, most evil jungle in America, at full volume, at full x-bass. Her whole state of being throbbed with spastic amen rhythms as she hopped chainlinks, king-kong-vaulted behind dumpsters, tic-tacked up brick palisades and freescaled all the incredible masonry Qin Street had to offer. This was Talia's ninja-traceur version of going out for a jog. A combination of parkour, sprinting, stealth, evasion, climbing, urban infiltration, and of course, the main source of the adredrenaline: running from the Teedot pigs on purpose. The only laws she ever actually broke were trespassing and denial of service attack against a municipal security entity. Both offenses merited mere fines, at least on paper. Talia knew all *too* well what happens when a person is out alone at night, all dressed in black tac, and they run into a cop, and, suddenly switching gears and body language, they appear to panic and then run as fast as possible in the opposite direction. The pigs will thus reliably provide the extreme traceur

with a free, high-quality service: exercise, challenge, adrenaline, and life-threatening pursuit.

This routine got started by accident when Talia was fifteen, back when she used to climb schools and churches at night to rappel off of them. Some Stepford wife with nothing better to do would often spot what looked like a ninja breaking into a church and she'd dial 911 like a knee-jerk reflex. The pigs would show up like pitbulls with their tactical weaponry, and she would be forced to run for her life through backyards with motion sensor spotlights and big dogs. She was arrested several times, usually for trespassing, but occasionally getting outright fucked with attempted b & e, based on manufactured evidence and creative witness questioning. After a while, Talia learned the pigs' m.o. for response to suspicious persons and trespassers, and she never got caught again.

She quickly grew tired of the simple climbing / rappelling routine, since she had already mastered all the sweetest climbs and perches Teedot had to offer. For over a year after the second attempted b & e arrest, she lived paranoid and avoided contact with the filth, since she didn't particularly *like* having her face ground into the pavement of an alleyway off Qin Street by an Altama tactical boot while two steroid-raging psychotics took turns holding her at nervepoint and sticking their filthy hands down her pants under the cover of witnessless shadows. But after a while, the sweet climbs grew mundane, and just climbing and rappelling them provided no rush; no exhilaration anymore. One day, she discovered a zine by a guy called Ninjalicious, who was known by reputation as a master of gaining access to really interesting and little-known areas of Teedot which were forbidden access to Joe Denominator. He called it "Urban Exploration" or "Physical

Space Hacking,” but the city’s emerging ninja clans developed the term “Ninjing” in his honor. With this door opened to her, she penetrated York University’s steam tunnels, the abandoned subway station, the sewers under Qin’s Park, hospital and hotel maintenance areas, and many other more carefully kept ninja clan secrets, as coveted as the Kage Clan’s rare flyer... "Six Principles of Stealth Clothing:"

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## Six principles of stealth clothing

### **1. Nonreflectivity - All surfaces and materials must absorb maximal light.**

- Dark colors.
- Low contrast between different colors.
- Matte, non-smooth fabrics such as cotton, fleece and suede.
- Unpolished dark plastics and metals.
- Do not wear jewelry of any kind.
- When a flashlight is necessary, always make use of a red filter. Red glowsticks, although more disposable than flashlights, are a bad idea, since they cannot be turned off or easily concealed when necessary.

### **2. Noiselessness - All materials must create minimal sound in friction with themselves or each other.**

- Most zippers, snaps and velcro are noisy. Favor buttons. Wrap zipper tabs in black fabric tape or stealthtape. Avoid velcro and snaps.
- Avoid metal buckles. Use black plastic webbing-buckles if necessary.

- Avoid clothing with high plastics content or excessively smooth surfaces, as it tends to swish.
- Cut the plastic nibs off your shoelaces.
- Do not wear shoes with an internal squeak or click.
- New shoes, especially skate shoes, usually squeak loudly on smooth surfaces such as tile, linoleum, finished wood, and smooth concrete. Wear your shoes in for several weeks before using them for stealth applications. The process can be sped up by sandpapering parts of your soles.
- Do not carry change, keys, etc. If you must carry a key, separate it and wear it on a lace around your neck.

### **3. Nonchalance - The clothing itself must not look criminally suspicious; designed for crime.**

- All-black clothing, ninja gear, camouflage, military or tactical gear, pants, vests, etc, tactical straps and slings, latex gloves, and especially masks, are contraindicated.
- You should be able to wear the entirety of your gear, unmodified, in a city crowd, and appear perfectly average.
- Gear pockets should be internal and concealed in frisk-free areas, or completely natural-looking.
- Favor dark clothing of two different colors. Grays are ideal for urban stealth.
- Favor a large, baggy hooded sweatshirt to conceal the face, rather than a mask.
- If you choose to carry identification, conceal it well, and secure it in a manner that makes it impossible to fall out. An internal, button-closable crotch-pocket for ID would be ideal.
- Avoid bringing non-disposable tactical gear. If you aren't willing to throw it down a sewer grate in a pinch, don't bring it unless you absolutely have to.

### **4. Mobility - Zero mobility impedance.**

- Loose-fitting, but not prone to snagging on protrusive objects. Avoid clothing with open loops and pants with straps over the pockets.
- Shoes with a good balance of treads and smooth-surface grip. Skate shoes are good.
- You should be able to comfortably (and noiselessly) do an entire Wushu form while fully geared up.
- Adjust for heat. Overheating is a form of mobility impedance. Heavy breathing and sweating breach noiselessness and nonreflectivity, respectively.

### **5. Durability - Resistant to catching / tearing / wearing down.**

- Favor clothing with reinforced knees and elbows.
- Favor durable fabrics which will not easily tear on chainlink fencetops, barbed wire, etc.

### **6. Scentlessness - Zero olfactory presence. More important than you might think.**

- Never wear cologne.
- Favor unscented anti-perspirant over deodorant.
- Do not smoke while wearing your gear.
- Wash clothing with unscented detergent and air-dry outdoors if possible.
- Bathe without soap or shampoo prior to your excursion. Spend a few hours idle in an urban environment first if time permits.
- If there is a distinct possibility of dogs, sprinkling cayenne pepper in strategic locations will help to disable their sense of smell, although large quantities may be required.

Sneaking in for the sake of sneaking in. Slick.

The more she infiltrated, the more the term "physical space hacking" started to make real sense to Talia... just like the exploits of hotshot traceurs, skaters and crackers, orthodox infiltration has always been something one does strictly out of fun, curiosity and personal challenge. (Nice firewall.... let's launch over it with a clown bike, dude. Word.)

But again, the adrenaline junkie's curse kicked in. Repetition always eventually leads to lack of flow. She was too good to get caught on infiltration runs - never setting off alarms, always using disposable lockpicks made of street sweeper bristles, never proud enough to leave a residual presence by tagging the place the way all the arrogant newschooler ninja kiddies often did. She'd discovered that the true, essential secret to infiltration was to become like water. Formless, shapeless, soft, flexible, ready to adapt and all-penetrating.

But, unfortunately, no more adrenaline came. Thirty to sixty mils of ephedrine immediately before the ninj would amplify her adrenal system immensely, but it fucked with her fine motor skills, especially lock picking. In a very masochistic and twisted way, she missed running from the cops. That was real fear; real danger. She'd learned so much from it; it always made her feel fully alive and primate in the moment. Talia became painfully aware that her safe, closed system had become inert and now required novelty of any available kind. So, one day while losing herself in a Phat Boy Pounderburger with triple garlic mayo sauce, she watched a couple of pigs chasing some shoplifter on foot down Yung Street. She wondered what would happen if, say a perfectly normal, innocent person - just some regular guy in the street minding his own business... what if Joe Denominator made eye contact with some cop and immediately bolted in the opposite

direction as fast as he could away from the pig? Right. Talia knew *exactly* what would happen. That little trigger at the base of every pig's brainstem that switches him from lazy racist homophobe mode to unreasonable psychotic killing machine mode would go "click.". The pig's central nervous system and his ultra-Freudian repressions of sex and violence would become one. If the running man didn't get away, he would be badly injured and most likely nailed with some bullshit summary conviction just to justify the ensuing brutality.

Perfect. It was exactly what Talia needed. Not only was it a high-quality danger, guaranteed to get the old norepinephrine flowing, but it was an irrational flaw in the justice system she just couldn't *wait* to fuck with, since it would always leave the filth confused and humbled when she got away. *Perfect.*

Her basic escape plan, if all attempts at evasion failed, was to get up on the roof of some three or four story private property and lay down against a darkened vertical surface near the street, remaining motionless and silent for up to three hours, or at least until the pigs filled out their "suspect got away" paperwork, gave up, and retreated to a 24/7 Big Willie Horton's to fill their disgusting faces full of edible oil products. One time, she used Speaker's Corner in a pinch, giving an out-of-breath rant about the incompetence and stupidity of the Teedot filth while they drove by in the background. As far as she knew, City TV never aired that one...

She considered her specialty to be free climbing old stonework, so areas like Qin Street were her bread and butter. Her real comfort zone. She occasionally got evasive help from dealers, gangs and some of the crazier homeless locals. It was unwanted help, but certainly a nice gesture that always restored a little of her faith in humanity - proof



that not everybody buys into those real life Copaganda shows that portray psychotic roid monkeys as inculpable heroes. She began to develop urban legendary status among the gangstas and the homeless, since whenever they saw her, they saw this comic book spectacle of Keystone Cops chasing a super hot she-ninja in skintight black lycra who never seemed to get caught. The Latinos called her L'Aragna Nera. And she was hot. Mad hot. Five foot two with the body of a sixteen year old gabbergirl, a shaved head with carrot-orange stubble, big, round, intense, ice-blue eyes, and perky little A cups that pointed outwards in two different directions. She had a huge Japanese tattoo of a blue goldfish, white cherry blossoms and swirly green water. Its tail was on her right hip, its body curved up across her back and its head was between her shoulder blades. It had been done in the traditional way with traditional tools and inks. Apparently the artist was a descendent of Horimono III and did regular work for the Teedot Yakuza.

She had been introduced to him by Trin, who was illegally importing authentic katana and wakizashi from Japan. In an effort to preserve the integrity of its rapidly Westernizing culture, Japan imposed very strict export and production laws dealing with swords, making it difficult for a serious kenshi like Talia to legitimately acquire anything but factory produced 440 stainless steel glorified kitchen knives with half tangs and polymer hilts from China. Swords that tend to lose their edge faster than the sharpening process itself. Like the saying goes, "Toy swords make toy swordsmen." *And swordswomen.*

Talia lay motionless and silent on the roof of a Qin Street condom shop as she heard the filth and all their noisy "nonlethal" Urb-Pac equipment storm past. Ten minutes passed, and she poked her masked face up just enough to scope the street. The filth were gone. She vaulted off the rooftop, landing silent and crouched in an alley shadow like a dark cottonball. As she landed, she noticed that one of the better graff crews in Teedot, the FEZ (Free Expression Zionists,) had watched the entire thing in amazement. She kissed two fingers and threw up the peace sign at the filter-masked kids, who gave up some golf claps and woop-woop-woops in deep respect. Any enemy of the pigs was a friend of theirs, solid. Talia smiled on the inside and allowed her self to be drowned in shadow. A quick change in a storm drain back to her loud zero-conspicuous street clothes, and she headed back home to check on that hermit drug fiend neighbor of hers.

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"The Ghost Clan definitely sees infiltration as a hip-hop thing. At least, the way our ninjas do runs, it is... Most other clans include the practice of infiltration as a mere elective in their urban ninjutsu stealth training, preferring to focus mostly on more profitable schools of stealth such as social engineering and electronic espionage. Ghost ninjas are traditionalists, and we harbor no interest in whoring our orthodox martial arts for profit. We are channelers of the Real. Asking a Ghost ninja why we infiltrate is exactly like asking a child why children obsessively try to touch the bottom of the pool's deep end. However, that urge is

merely the nature of our will to invisibly penetrate. It is the Real who motivates that will; it is the Real who pilots our spines and pirates our senses when we do stealthruns. When we infiltrate, we let the Real possess us and guide us to whatever ninjsite the Real has selected for us. See, the Real can't see itself through the eyes of Babylonians, so to speak, because Babylonians pay no attention to the Real. So whenever the city itself needs to explore the intimate details of some new corporate erection, the details and entrances usually well-marked in colorful and bold art-crypto by Real-possessed graff writers, we ninja enter a trance and become the city's invisible sneaking, crawling, climbing bioprobes... the eyes, the ears, and the self-diagnostic introspection of the Real. You cannot possibly imagine the sheer exhilaration of feeling the true urban gaia explore itself using your body and its specialized human sensory faculties... you can actually *feel* the Real looking through your eyes and paying attention to certain details that always turn out to be of exceptional interest on closer inspection."

- *Name Withheld*; Ghost Clan sensei.

## Chapter Ten

They will tell you that your reality is a deterministic machine. They will tell you that free will exists only as a necessary illusion to keep us from raping, destroying, killing and burning everyone and everything in sight. Their position is logically valid; maybe even sound by the cannibalistic rules of their reasoning systems, but the truth is they couldn't have been more wrong.

Your reality is a processed version of your consciousness; a variable reflection of those concepts and beliefs held present in consciousness during the immediate moment. Hold an idea in your conscious attention long enough and it **will** manifest in reality. The longer you can maintain this conscious attention, the more intensely it will manifest.

Hold concept x in your immediate conscious attention as long as possible, as frequently as possible, and you will cause permutations and dreamlike metaphors of x to manifest in the reality which surrounds you.

On a planet which, without consciousness, is a nearly perfect closed system, reality without consciousness is inert; static... Consciousness is necessary to introduce randomness, unpredictability and novelty into an otherwise deterministic checkmate.

-From "*The Cosmic Wheel of Fortune and Novelty*,"

a.k.a

*"Some Fucking Pamphlet That Assholes are Always Shoving Under My Apartment Door And Which I Always Throw Out."*

Howard spent so much of his conscious time immersed in realities which were self-constructed from the primordial chaos of his deep subconscious that he rarely ever dreamed. When he did dream, his dreams were mundane, and usually frustrating to leave. Everyone has had that dream where they find millions of dollars and become fantastically rich, only to awaken feeling robbed, poor and frustrated. Howard's dreams were basically the same deal. He would think up a method of mentally factoring hundred-thousand-digit primes merely by picturing dots on the faces of a pair of n-dimensional rotating dice, thinking to himself, "*It's so ridiculously easy to do ... I wonder why no one ever thought of this before*," and then he would awaken to a reality where cold, hard mathematical logic refused to be trifled with in such a flippant manner, and so he would writhe in his bed and punch himself in the forehead out of sheer frustration. Howard punched himself in the head on a regular basis. As hard as he could. With Howard's junkie stature, his skinny fist was a laughable weapon, though he knew it was going to damage his precious brain, and probably even give him a fatal aneurysm one

day. But it was his unfortunately hardwired reaction to intense frustration... *When a computer fails and frustrates you, you smash the keyboard. If a video game frustrates you, you smash the controller paddle. And when the world around you frustrates you, you smash that which interfaces it with you ... your brain.* Howard once researched the area of his brain that he was most likely damaging by doing this. Ironically, it was a speech center. Howard had already been physically incapable of speech for many years.

*Poked at the fucking burger again. Start over.* Howard was dreaming. Raw geometry sometimes composed the fabric of his dream-environment, occasionally phasing in and out of a featureless and unskinned world of labeled polygons and arcs. He was dreaming about an irrational number sequence he'd discovered on a Prisperin overdose. He was in the process of charting out the first half-million decimal places of this sequence on an XY graph. X was regular intervals of one millisecond. Y was the decimal place, from zero to nine. Once he had charted this and connected the dots, he vertically mirrored the chart, creating a massively long, erratic-looking symmetrical shape. He then plotted thousands of points along a single curve, closely matching the shape's contours. Piece by piece, he scanned this composite image into his computer and fed it to a sound editor, which did its best to interpret the shape as a soundwave. The idea was to find out what sorts of noises the "Glass Sequence" would produce if it were interpreted as a soundwave in various contexts. The very first result was astonishing. It produced distinct, Latinate speech! Howard only knew rudimentary Latin, and couldn't understand a word of it, so he hired a translator from Rutgers to tell him what it said. The translator told Howard that it wasn't Latin at all, but a bizarre Aegean dialect from pre-Christian times. A team of overenthusiastic linguistics scholars tore into it and broke it

down into its Greek phonemes and raw grammar. The result was an intelligible language, alright. It was *Atlantean*. The first half million decimal places of the Glass Sequence produced seven sentences of information. The sequence, being theoretically infinite in length, becomes twice as frustrating at this point, because no mortal can ever hear the entire message. But the two paragraphs that Howard had managed to decipher were enough to launch a multi-billion dollar research project by Rutgers, Stuttgart and Berkeley.

**The Glass Sequence Message (1<sup>st</sup> 9 seconds):**

*The circle is the smallest expression of order; of non-randomness; of pattern; of the existence of intelligence within a chaotic universe.*

*The circle guarantees repetition; guarantees “rhythm.”* (note: ‘rhythm’ is nearest possible translation in context)

*Repetition is the fundamental essence of pattern.*  
*Repetition is space.*

*Rhythm is repetition's variable; that which guarantees different patterns. Rhythm is time.*

*All of the recognizable patterns in the universe are  
based on repetition and rhythm. Space-time order.  
Expressed as simply and as elegantly as the circle.*

*This is the essence of the relationship between the  
circle's diameter to its radius. The circumference  
modifies its repetition; the radius modifies its rhythm.*

*Anything that is an expression of order or pattern  
stems from this ...*

Howard became incredibly famous. He was having lunch with his project manager in Berlin. Howard often had a working voice in his dreams, but other times he dreamed in telepathy; entire conversations, like the one he was having in Berlin, would be him and someone else just "understanding" each other back and forth without speaking or signing. His project manager was a swarthy thin man in a white trenchcoat who never said his name. They were eating fat-dripping Ganeshaburgers on a terrace cafe overlooking the Rhone. The man was empathically projecting his appreciation of the fantastic flavor and texture of the elephant-headed god. Something along the lines of, "Damn this is tasty." Howard agreed. Different meats have different physiological effects on the body, mind and emotions... Buffalo has a warrior vibe, moose has a slow, powerful, tranquil energy, and so on. This particular meat felt billions of years old... as if an ancient forbidden intelligence was absorbing into his bloodstream.



The Man in White looked Howard in the eyes and asked him, in a midget-yelling-into-a tin-can voice, "So, Howard, what's your next project?" He stared at his burger for a second and a bite went missing. His neck ballooned out, cartoon-style, as he swallowed.

Howard replied, "I'm going to do it. For real. I'm going to take four more attack doses of LPMT and transmigrate to the Other Place. Only problem is, I'm short one pill... Can you hook me up?" A swarm of parrots flew over their table backwards, whispering impossible eigenvalues in passing.

"I'm sorry, Howard, I don't spend much time in that other world, and I can't really deal with it very well when I'm there. It's too noisy, too frustrating, you know?" The burger in his hand was now a roll of clotted, bloodstained toilet paper. Sand poured gently up through the cracks between the terrace cobblestones.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean." Howard started to poke a hole in his Ganeshaburger and suddenly felt a strong urge to refrain. Every time Howard poked at his burger at this point in the dream, he forgot he was dreaming and the dream started over from the beginning. This had been the fifth replay of the same dream before he made the burger loop connection and learned not to poke the burger. Howard was about to ask his project manager if he remembered repeating the exact same sequence of events five times already, but the intense little man interrupted him like a verbal stop-hit.

"Well, Howard, I wish you luck on the reality thing," He produced an extremely illegal double-barreled sawed-off shotgun, and loaded and cocked it as he spoke, "But if there's one thing I've learned in that world of yours, it's that no matter how predictable it *seems*, it always manages to surprise the shit out of you." He put both barrels on his

mouth and muttered, almost incoherently, "That is, unless you're the type who sells their soul for security and lives in a fucking dollhouse. Mind if I brush my teeth at the table?"

Howard shook his head no, of course not. There was a deafening blast, and the man's head was gone. His body got up and exited the scene through a blood-soaked, buckshot-riddled hole that had been blasted through the fabric of reality behind him.

Howard woke up.

While he was busy punching himself in the head and angrily gagging, he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of long, unwashed red hair near his bookcase, but there was no one there now, and all the entrances were still sealed. The profound discovery evaporated like so much ether. There was never any Glass Sequence, fuck. He cracked himself in the cheekbone, stumbled over to his window and involuntarily squinted as he let sunlight in through the blinds. The crowd of weird hippies was growing ever larger; the most cultish among them staring up at Howard like rabid puppies. He wondered what the fuck they wanted.

He moped over to his meager bachelor kitchenette and took a half-carton of eggs from the yellowing refrigerator. He moseyed back to the window, opened it, and began tossing eggs at the cult-looking types below, sullenly trying to hit them in the face. They made no attempts to dodge the eggs. Instead, they cheered wildly at the surreal experience as the eggs broke against their heads and chests. Some of them gleefully searched for the deeper spiritual meaning behind Howard's egging.

*What a bunch of fucking weirdos*, he thought. He closed the window and walked over to a large porcelain pig on his end table and removed its head. He reached into a cornucopia of baggies, loose pills, small bottles, and other psychedelic goodies, and fished out the puzzle cube, then replaced the ceramic pig's head.

He had already solved for  $S3(P1)$ , which had been an introduction to geocryptography. He sat down in the middle of his room in the lotus position and began the arduous task of solving for  $S3(P2-6)$  and  $S4(P1)$ , which was unfathomable to him pending the hard lessons enciphered into the cryptomechanical surface of  $S3$ .

He took a bonghit and let his intellect go limp. Mushin. Without interference from his mind's second-guessing, mental chatter, self-doubt and obsession with possibilities and probabilities, his brain, eyes and hands went to work expertly and automatically learning and deciphering  $S3$ .

## Chapter Eleven

Attack Dose Number Three.

S3(P14-18) and S4(P19).

Each cube surface seems to have its own musical tone or tones which briefly chime whenever a puzzle is solved. It was only a single note for S1 and S2, C and G respectively, and I originally thought them to be default beeps. But S3 produces a G+C harmony, and S4(P19) emitted a 3-note G-C-D progression.

Geometric crypto is mind-blowingly fucked. The entity who designs these cubes must possess an alien intelligence, because I can't fathom a human mind coming up with this shit, and certainly nothing like it exists in nature.

I understand it all now. Fascinating. Infinity concepts, particularly the cryptographic potential of what I'll call pseudoinfinite primes, figure prominently. Grasping nothingness has gifted me with the ability to relax and spontaneously detach from everything; to suicide my ego on a whim and to pull it back out of the nothing and reconstruct "me" from ambient memory. I am capable of a

kind of mushin, complete with reset feature, and I hope to use this detachment to control the trauma inflicted by the first three hours of this amazing drug. I am about to sign off, swallow all 6, and meditate my self out of the picture. (No intellect, nothing to traumatize, I hope.)

(Oh, and to whoever it is that's spying on me and going through these journals, fuck you. You have no moral integrity and you suck. Justice, like karma, will fuck you in the ass eventually. This is private intellectual property. I found one of your long red hairs under my computer desk and three of my journals smell like girl and dread wax. Do not mistake my muteness for stupidity. Go away.)

Love, Howard

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No toes, no feet, no ankles, no shins or calves, no knees, no thighs, no groin, no belly, no back, no spine, no chest, no shoulders, no biceps or triceps, no elbows, no wrists, no hands, no fingers, no neck, no head, no face, no mind, no self ...

The consciousness called "Howard" had once again meditated itself out of existence.

The consciousness reincarnated as an astral concept, also called Howard. The reborn Howard was much like a dream body, but from an above-and-behind perspective. He located himself on a smooth, iridescent, peacock-blue pathway leading up to a colossal temple before him and disappearing into the star-speckled blackness of the cosmos behind him. He inhaled deeply through his nose. Space smelled sterile and cold, surprisingly like a brand new refrigerator... or maybe a hockey rink.

He calmly approached the temple in silent awe. Space was so quiet, he could hear his footsteps echoing off distant planets. He thought to himself in a very Alice in Wonderland tone, "*Now this doesn't make any sense at all ...*" The temple appeared to be constructed of shiny red marble, and possibly of Corinthian architecture, with a massive black dome on top and huge sculpted columns in front, stretching perhaps five hundred meters from base to top.

*...but what would the Corinthians be doing in outer space?*

The question made so little sense to him that it drowned itself in tangents and never resurfaced.

Common to dreaming, meditating and hallucinating, he spontaneously understood the temple; no information or stimulus necessary. *A priori*, he suddenly just *knew* that the temple was his subconscious, and that whatever was inside could be bloody useful to him, and that many of his more enduring metaphysical questions could be answered in there. His calmness flooded with enthusiasm, and he began to rush towards its entrance.

Being an astral form and all, Howard could not physically tire, but he soon discovered that the temple was getting further away as he approached it.

*Fuck. I know this one ...* Howard remembered that the most frustrating metaphysical principle was that desire is inversely proportional to fulfillment - "The more you want something, the harder you push yourself away from it, and the more fervently you avoid something, the more you attract it to you." This is directly connected to another, more popular principle, "Nature abhors a vacuum." You can immediately have anything you don't want, and you will attract anything you try to run from, so the answer is ... turn and run.

And so he did. He turned around to face the endless blue path into nothing and ran. He ran for so long that he eventually forgot about the temple altogether. And of course, right at that very moment, he tripped over the temple's front steps.

Zen logic always cheesed Howard off.

Having learned his lesson in desire, he clambered up the huge marble steps deliberately harboring no more than a lukewarm curiosity. When he reached the top, there was no entrance. *Fuck I hate this shit. I'm a mathematician for fuck's sake.*

He tried not wanting there to be a door for while, but he soon realized that no matter what he told himself, he would still secretly be wanting a door. He wasn't that easy to trick. *How do I fool my own mind?*

He tried all kinds of intellectual subterfuges on himself but none of them worked. He was desperate for a door and there wasn't going to be one. He tried forgetting about the door, but couldn't. He tried willing the existence of a door, but of course that didn't work. He tried asking for one, he tried demanding one, and he even tried walking

*through* the marble wall with all the Berkeleyan faith he could summon. But still, no entrance.

Eventually, after something like three weeks' subjective time, he remembered some orphaned fragment of Zen, or maybe Pooh, which always joked, "if you can't find the truth right where you are, where else do expect to find it?" It occurred to Howard that gaining entrance to the temple might be irrelevant, and that simply being there, in that state of awareness, was really all he needed to get those serious metaphysical questions of his answered. The lack of entrance had been nothing more than a meaningless mental block between himself and the truth. He just shook his head in relieved humility as the door appeared.

Inside the temple was a single impossibly huge chamber with a dais in the center. The dais had a polished wooden dictionary-pedestal on it, and a huge black leather tome embossed with a gold letter " I " on the cover sat upon it. There was also a perfect sphere of clear, polished crystal suspended in the air above the book, about the size of Earth's moon. The immense architecture even housed several distant nebulae. Wafting out of a cool pink galaxy to Howard's left was beautiful ethereal space music of some kind. Something Strauss might have composed, had he access to the musical technology of culturally hyperadvanced alien civilizations.

*I wonder if my subconscious is composing that music spontaneously?*

The crystal sphere lit up magnesium white and Howard felt nothing but an overwhelming, intuitive **Yes**, amplified a billion times. He was never so sure of anything in his entire life. Then the sphere returned to clarity.



Howard thought about what happened for a little while. He deliberately wondered out loud whether the sphere was a direct and absolute connection to his intuition, without interference from thoughts or emotions or biases.

White. **Yes.**

*Fucking right on!*

He asked the question he always wanted to ask: *Do I perceive or evoke reality?*

No response. *Shit, it has to be a yes or no question. Do I perceive reality? **Yes.** Do I evoke reality? **Yes.** Do I sometimes perceive reality and other times evoke it? **No.** Crap I'll have to come back to that one. Do I exist? **Yes.** Does anything other than me exist? There was a long pause. **Yes.** Am I my consciousness? **Yes.** If I am my consciousness, Howard realized, *then something other than me must necessarily exist for me to be conscious OF, or else I would cease to exist. **Yes.** So it's not a solipsism thing then. **No.** Relative to my consciousness, is that which I perceive real? **No.** Relative to that which I perceive, is my consciousness real? **No.** So there's, what, a higher-level-me and I'm like a drunken, crippled, amnesiac version of my higher consciousness or something? **Yes.****

...and by a creative process of methodical elimination over the course of four hours or so, Howard figured himself out. Entirely.

Hours later, as he hunched over his journal in bed, he added:

If I am capable of absolute self-awareness, and if everything of which I am conscious IS me, then I must be capable of extending this new found awareness to everything of which I am

immediately conscious. S4's first lesson would definitely indicate that something like hyper-awareness will be the key to unlocking geocryptographic dynamics.

No horrific ideas or sounds or anything this time... I think my S2-acquired objectivity has tamed the drug's terrible onset. I see the overlapping reality everywhere, even sober, and each successive attack dose makes it all easier to understand. The Other Place is beautiful, but I can't let it distract me from my objective. Three more attack doses as soon as possible. Will resume project after much-needed unconsciousness; my schiz is acting up... I feel someone watching me and I think it's a girl. That red hair I found and wrote about is gone, and these books don't smell like girl anymore. I must be fucking insane. Anyway...

-HG

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The Palmers of Light collectively felt a ripple of prophetic magnitude in the realities around them. *“He is awakening. He has noticed the stray piece of yarn sticking out of the fabric of spacetime, and he is about to start unraveling it...”*

And from his predatory position in the beams underneath the South Bridge, The Man in White felt it too. Ever since they had met in Howard's dream, Wim felt changed by the experience.

As it is told on the street, the tale of Wim Nightscales' successful detachment from the 47 Ronin starts off unusually simple, but grows increasingly hard to believe.

It is said that Master Sensei Wim-San simply didn't show up for practice at the dojo one day, leaving it up to the kendo instructor to teach half an iaido class. In fact, he didn't show up at the temple either. In fact, he apparently disappeared for several months. The other two Masters took over all of his classes, and great effort was put into finding him quietly so that his unique and elite position among the Ronin would not have to be filled.

The rules dictate that there can only *ever* be forty-seven of them, and the only way to join them is to make your own opening by killing one of them in formal combat, and the other Ronin must bear witness and agree that the fight was won honorably. To have a Ronin just disappear like that creates a major administrative nightmare within the 47 Ronin. If a new member can join without killing anyone, the neonate will never fit in among the other forty-six. It can't be the "46 Ronin", and it can't be the "46 Ronin And One Pussy-Ass Bitch."

This had never happened before, and they were evidently too focused on combat training to consider a contingency plan. They decided on a tentative one. If Wim-San wasn't located by the beginning of Autumn, he would be considered dishonorably dead. They would then advertise an opening in the 47 Ronin, along the lines of: "Be the first to join without having to face the obviously impossible task of killing an existing Ronin!" They would screen all applicants, (perhaps by savagely attacking them with bamboo weapons whenever they weren't ready,) choose the best two prospective kenshi among them, and make THEM fight to the death. The winner would get to join.

Instead, the day before they pronounced him dead, he showed up at the kendojo swordless and looking like a modern day Ran; grizzled, thin and insane, with street-blackened bare feet, ripped up cargo shorts, and the top half of an old, faded Adidas neogene Stealthsuit dripping off his scrawny shoulders like a roiling unfocused grey fishing net. He frowned intensely, shuffled into the center of the tatami mats and ordered everyone to attack him, then they say he mumbled something like “*waking bulb*” under his breath, just standing there with his hands casually clasped, staring insanely at the floor. Who knows what he really said, or in what language?

No one did anything. When a Master Sensei commands you to do something, you do it. They were mostly confused and hesitant to act until they understood what was actually happening. So, not one of the forty-six acted. He then explained to them that a superior swordsman would not have allowed confusion to interfere with direct action. In such an insulting and dishonoring tone, actually, that the nine eldest veterans all simultaneously stood and drew their swords. He next explained to them that superior swordsmen would never allow their emotions to draw their sword for them. In such a derogatory and condescending tone, actually, that thirty-nine of them now had their swords drawn in fury towards their unarmed and apparently insane Master Sensei. He pushed them further and further, playing their Bushido egos, calling them weak, undisciplined and impotent.

“I have taught myself skills that make me far superior to any of you pathetic anachronisms. Attack me if you want, but if you do, you’ll never learn my techniques.”

It is said that at the very moment the veterans realized the potential of this and prepared to diffuse the hostility, three of the newest Ronin lost their collective cool and

attacked Master Sensei Wim-San. An impossibly bright and silent flash was seen coming from the main window of the kendojo. The forty-six ronin all woke up in various positions on the mats and floor with deeply bloodshot eyes and ringing, bleeding ears. No one really knows what happened, but the three who attacked him are said to have a permanent afterimage of Wim-San's burning white silhouette on their retinas.

## Chapter Twelve

Tritia was standing in Howard's apartment, looking through his myriad black hand-written journals and the other books on his shelf. Ouspensky, Gurdjieff, Bey, McKenna... he even had required Nod reading - The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. What caught her eye first was a crumpled, brightly colored pamphlet among dozens of delivery flyers and junkmail in a spartan wire trashbin by the front door. She fished it out and examined the back panel to confirm that the color combination meant what she thought it did. She was right. It was a Palmers of Light propaganda pamphlet, but unfortunately it did not contain enough positive ID to justify termination just yet. It had been thrown away unopened with the rest of the mail, and even his bills and personal mail. So there still existed concrete evidence to establish that Howard had no knowledge of the Palmers of Light, nor of their agendas. She skimmed over it a few times, scanning for the most coherent chunk...

“The problem with the Christian Heaven is that its believers only want to go there as the alternative to an infinity of torture. It has little allure compared to an afterlife such as Valhalla, where the faithful drink endless mead, dine on rich meats and party it up with their fallen comrades; nonstop, forever. Heaven, on the other hand, features no alluring *earthly* pleasures; nothing enticing that the living can relate to. As it is with their invisible God, one

must have abject faith in the inherent goodness of His heaven. Even the Turkish assassins believed in an afterlife of drinking and whoring. Every warrior culture such as ours **deserves** such an afterlife of worldly indulgence. Now, *technologically advanced* warrior cultures can take on one of two basic doctrines to facilitate all of the murder carried out in their name. They can adopt atheism-nihilism, or if they're lucky, they can develop fanaticism. Christianity isn't strong or flexible enough anymore to achieve fanaticism, so it is doomed in a culture like ours..."

Tritia took a seat, looked down, giggled, and read on.

"...Heaven was brainstormed by morose theologians, not by true artists... not by the enlightened. There is no technology in Heaven, whose greatest technological advancement seems to be metallurgical applications of analog music and security. For a species which has inseparably integrated itself with technology at this early point in its evolution, how bland is an analog infinity of prudence and humble worship? Our culture needs an afterlife model where technology is so advanced that it promises an infinity of novelty to its faithful. Why not have an afterlife where virtual reality completely fools you and you can spend four hundred years as a tree, or four

hours in an ancient Turkish harem, or twenty years as a sentient algorithm? Create **that** afterlife for your potential followers and then somehow let them glimpse it for real, and you've GOT your fanaticism. *However*, the truly enlightened among us realize that we are, in effect, **already participating** in such an afterlife... that every one of our thoughts and experiences in this profoundly convincing virtual reality are nothing more than the musings and influences of a bored sentience who is playing a game in an almost desperate attempt to experience something; *anything* novel and above all unpredictable. Each of Howard's incarnations opened our eyes to the truth of this."

*-Final Communique of a Political Prisoner;*

*Brahma Satya Olafsson of the LPMT Trinity*

*Whoa, does he even **know** they're talking about him like this?* Looking down at Howard with catlike curiosity, she watched him flop and writhe on the ground in a gradual circle around her chair, drooling, nosebleeding and occasionally gagging, but generally *doing okay so far*, she thought. Pocketing the pamphlet, she picked up his most recent journal entry and read it as she watched him do laps.

Attack Dose 4. S4(P20-24) + S5(P25).

S4 = GCD tone;

S5=DGCD.



True disciples of math tend towards moral agnosticism, but I have now seen the face of evil mathematics and its name is *Geocryptographic Dynamics*. There are lemmas, theorems and axioms in this system which you must abjectly accept in your heart as a necessary and essential prerequisite for their application and use in the subsequent lesson-puzzles. You cannot proceed without accepting certain values into your heart and belief structure. Accepting any new information directly into the architecture of consciousness, unfiltered by burden of logical proof, is a terrifying leap of faith, especially for a scholar of math. I felt the structure of my consciousness rebuild itself into a more crystalline and sensitive instrument. I felt parts of me die, unable to share accommodation with the lemmas and axioms of Geocryptographic Dynamics. They felt like darkside math atrocities on acceptance them into my heart... Every time I learn something new about this cube it's like I'm selling my soul to it. Everything I knew about n-dimensional space was wrong and was just raped and cannibalized by the evil new math. But now, after the fact, I feel permanently hyper-aware. Now I'm thinking maybe Euclid and Pythagoras and company were New World Order types,

men with intelligence agendas who knew the **real** geometry, but cooked up a neat, simple, perfect, plausible math to distract the world from discovering the true structure of space and its relationship with time and consciousness. In exactly the same way that you can't observe something without having a permanent, changing effect on it (think back to basic quantum theory,) you also can't work on or solve these dilemmas without permanently changing - *and* permanently being changed by - the math itself. This all happens simultaneously and instantly. S5(P25) was cruel and unusual. I was presented with a dilemma where what looks like the P1 puzzle could be solved in two polar opposite ways; one using Euclidean-based geometry, which is a simple solution similar to P1, and a long way using the new Geocryptographic Dynamics, which took me three hours. I'm not going to even TRY solving any more puzzles the oldschool way... all the Euclidean-based answers look like traps. Shit. Now I feel like my body's starting to swim apart. ... TBC ..."

Tritia looked at poor Howard writhing around on his apartment floor all freaked out in the nasty onset phase of his fourth straight attack dose of LPMT. She'd seen enough proof in Howard's journals and scanned it all into her recon file. Howard was exactly what Nod's intelligence database had predicted, and it was therefore her

irrefutable duty to *make the file prove the theory*: encrypt, hide and send the file to Nod; mastermind a rare and incomprehensible murder; wait for Nod's acknowledgement and directive; carry out the plan; take a full collection of samples; signal the garbage truck if necessary. Howard was a hanged man.

She figured that some magical combination of Howard's social aversion, his muteness, and his sheer ignorance of the Palmers' existence was responsible for keeping him safely under Nod's radar all this time. *He couldn't have been born in any globalized country; at least, not in any of their hospitals. Messiahs are typically identified within twelve hours of birth, as soon as their genome sequences are uploaded to the medical databanks. Maybe Howard was born midwife-style; ouch! Three out of four American snatches aren't even big enough to pass babies through anymore. Well, anyway, imprudent to take him out here and now...* this was her thirteenth hit; the all-glamorous retirement gig, and she wanted to do it textbook. *Not for Nod, though; for her.*

She packed up most of her Ninja-Tek passive surveillance gear and got ready to leave. She sighed and gently rolled him over on his back, just on the off chance that he might choke on some vomit while unconscious and save her a whole lot of planning and effort. She laid her latex-coated fingertips on the doorknob just as a startling series of sharp knocks came through from the other side, nearly stopping her heart; forcing her to burn a little neuron, subdue her adrenal system and remain silent, calm, motionless.

More knocks, and then whoever it was started trying the handle. There was no peephole in this one. *Fuck*, she thought, *just give up and go away!* She glanced over at Howard to see if he noticed anything, but he was oblivious, and also eerily fish-like.

Forty-five minutes earlier, the drug had impacted Howard's consciousness with the metaphysical equivalent of a fission bomb. And for a few intensely frustrating hours prior to becoming permanently hyper-aware, Howard became the *School of Howard*. The School of Howard's reality worked like this:

There exists a school of fish named Howard. Each fish in the School of Howard is also named Howard. Each Howard in the School of Howard is capable of independent thought, however, that independent thought is also broadcast to the thoughts of every other Howard in the School of Howard as it occurs, since the School of Howard also shares a collective consciousness.

The School of Howard is swimming against the powerful current of an infinite stream, which loops upon itself. [Normally, a current would not exist in a closed-loop infinite stream. The School of Howard has developed infinitely efficient swimming skills over an infinity of evolution. This creates more energy going backward than forward as the School of Howard swims, however, that energy loops backwards and becomes current, with just enough energy lost in the process to create mutually antagonistic perpetual motion between the current and Howard.] We'll call this stream 'Awareness.'

Whenever any particular Howard begins to ponder, question, wonder about, analyze, or otherwise attempt to understand the nature of Awareness (wondering how swimming works, for example,) all of the other Howards, by reflex, begin distracting the inquisitive one with their own individual thoughts, all broadcast simultaneously. The distractions can be anything from broadcasting random colors, numbers, images, sounds,

rhythms, smells, etc. - to spontaneously thinking of something more interesting and appealing to think about instead of wondering about the nature of Awareness.

This group distraction reflex is a bio-survival mechanism built right into Howard's DNA. Although the Howards don't realize it, if any Howard were to gain an understanding of the nature of Awareness, that understanding would be instantly broadcast to the School of Howard. The School of Howard would collectively discover the secret of the nature of Awareness, which is that The School of Howard could swim much more efficiently **with** the current than **against** it. The School of Howard would thus immediately reverse its direction. Since Howards are the product of an infinity of evolution, and have developed infinitely efficient swimming skills, the current is the only thing stopping them from accelerating to death; their bodies converted to pure, explosive energy.

So, this group distraction phenomenon is pure survival instinct; Howard doesn't even know why he has always distracted an individual Howard whenever that individual Howard contemplated the nature of Awareness. This group distraction is extremely fun for the group and extremely frustrating for the individual. It is especially frustrating because each Howard in the School of Howard has attempted to learn the nature of Awareness an infinite number of times, and failed, because he got distracted by every other Howard every single time.

Since we're dealing with infinities, Howard will never understand the nature of Awareness.

While Howard slowly and patiently conquered all the vicious circles and

paradoxes his chemically flooded brain forced him to experience, Tritia silently bolted out his patio door and hopped over to the next balcony.

## Chapter Thirteen

Orange dreads like a fat sarcastic bunch of carrots. Codename Tyt, but don't *ever* fucking call her that. Tritia was also Nod, but without Nyn's epic self-laughingstocking anal retentiveness. They were longtime friends, but they'd been out of touch for almost a year. The last time Nyn saw Tyt, they were collaboratively working the LA underground; covertly discovering budding modern shaman types like Lily, Lennon, Huxley, Hicks, Wilson, Castaneda, Morrison, McKenna, Kesey, Burroughs and Bey, (not to mention Hicks, Ott, Watts and Leary; the "best minds of our generation," as Nod often eerily joked.) Once they found a candidate who regularly dared to journey within against the will of the Empire, they collected and organized enough solid evidence that proved the Messiah was encouraging too many other suggestible brains to likewise journey within and seek answers. Then their job became making one hundred percent sure that the Messiah lost public credibility and died of a rare and exotic organ disease.

Messiahs had to be terminated as young as possible; before they seeded too many open young minds and threatened to drastically change the rules on everyone. Since the assassination of a Messiah typically produces a martyr, the follow-through on a typical hit involves working with the cryptic mortician-dressed ubergeeks in Nod Information Control who, if they were doing their jobs well, should already have been working around the clock hoarding, rewriting and re-disseminating the ex-Messiah's literature, websites, and other media to include subtle Nazi, anticop, drug, white supremacist, black anarchist, extremist, pedophile, terrorist, activist and sometimes even self-evolutionary allusions and contexts. NIC also has a fantastic budget with which to bribe university

professors and media moguls to retell the story their way. Fahrenheit-51, the hoard-and-burn information control method, had worked wonders for Nod up until the internet happened, but then the information in people's heads impelled them to build a much more efficient circulatory system for information than sound and paper, and lo, the internet created itself; where information could be omnipresent and immortal. (Especially with the dual advents of public key crypto and P2P filesharing in the late nineties and early naughts, which nearly disarmed the information control profession altogether.) On the other hand, internetworked information affords Nod the luxury of tracking these individuals down long before they start to make names for themselves like the LSD gurus did. Back then, they were dead by twenty-one. Thirty-two, tops. Now, thanks to obsessive medical record keeping, Messiahs occasionally experience crib death before they even learn the language necessary to spread their infectious ideological iconoclasy. NIC's job is to erase as much of the terminated Messiah's residual information, (teachings, principles, brain software, memes, infovirus, etc) by scandalizing, invalidating, discrediting, slowly rewriting and quietly republishing, politically oppressing, paying pop icons to satirize, and in some cases even resorting to Fahrenheiting the Messiah's codified teachings if it comes down to all that.

Back then, Tritia's *client markets* were the Berkeley campus philosophers, biochemists, feminists and psychologists, so she sported a full-on bulldyke look at the time... brush cut, spike-tipped four-gauge piercings, patched up combat pants, tank top... unslung, unpainted and unshaven. Real riot grrl aggro. Nowadays, she was going for a more Teedot-style urban guerrilla look... bright orange ragamuffin hairstyle and a sleek geared-up tactical leather catsuit look which at least wasn't wearing *her*. Plus, it covered



up the double-joined Venus symbol flash on her belly, so she could seduce men when it was to her tactical advantage.

She was curled up in a corner shadow silently sifting thin air for radiant information, making out multiple conversations, listening for keywords, choosing the conversations or feeds with the most keywords, then reverse-filtering them through her illegally modded Wernicke's area to find hard evidence of a Messiah.

She singled out a conversation on the microwave channel; probably a low-end Voiptap, considering the canny echo.

*...so what do you want for your birthday?*

*I dunno... a drug I've never tried? Yeah. I want three doses of a drug I've never tried for my birthday.*

*\*muffles phone\* Dave! What do you have? ... nah man, I mean name **everything** you can hook me up with. Right. ...mm-hm. Mm-hm. Cool. Thanks. Lemme get back to ya. \*unmuffles phone\* ok. Out of crack, uh, five-*emm-ee-oh-dee-**emm**-tee*, Bu...**fot**-enine?, sixty-four-bit-Seebee, Soma, wait- what? uh huh, Prisperin, Opi- what? Oh, sorry... **gmOpium**, uh, Zazen and Zero, is that it? That's it. Out of all that shit, what haven't you tried?*

*Um. I only tried Prisperin twice...*

*Jesus dude! ... What's Prisperin?*

*Uh, okay it's kinda like being a really really massively powerful half-animal-half-god chilling in a custom-generated synthetic heaven... yeah... and like, you're surrounded by all these horny wet codeclone sluts that have been reverse-engineered by data passively extracted right out of the deepest parts of your libido. Sometimes you drink*

*the nectar of these sinister sweet fresh fruits and they have these unstable sugar molecules that you metabolize into a rush that would make pseudopamine HCL feel like a god damned placebo. Totally. Of course, this rush is all psychosomatic, since this is all happening while you're crawling around on the carpet giggling and shit.*

*Woah, cool. Sounds awesome.*

*Wait, that's only for the first ten minutes. It gets worse. Then, you do a twenty meter bellyflop into a cold pool of disorienting nightmares. I dunno, for the next twelve minutes or so. If you have the strength to get your chill on and tame the experience, then you'll usually go unconscious, but at the same time you'll be lucid and aware... like, capable of completely manipulating every detail of the reality around you.*

*Whoa. And what if you can't get your shit together?*

*Yikes. They usually have a seizure and fall into a deep, dreamless coma for a while. Not for amateurs, kids.*

*Whoa.*

*Boring hippie bullshit. No messiahs in there. Next.*

Tritia was a master of stealth; fully indistinct from her surroundings at will. Her work was swift, surgical, bone dry, confusing and impossible to reverse engineer. Despite her often flamboyant fashions over the last three years or so, none of her twelve clients had ever seen her face, although a couple had (briefly) felt her latex-coated palm over their mouth and nostrils while a mole in their neck was injected with her own special super-spine-relaxing surf-and-turf shellfish-toxin-and-curare cocktail.

Unlike Nyn, Tritia was a hardcore free spirit, so her Nod conditioning didn't usually rape her dreams the way it did Nyn's. Ask anyone who hadn't actually **watched** her work and they'd tell you straight up she was a real, genuine human being.

*And humans **need** to dream, she always thought, because it's the only unpredictable part of our day. If I was a god and I had the power to do everything I felt like doing, I'd be bored retarded in nine months. The only thing an all powerful being wants is novelty. Surprise. For something, anything to happen that it absolutely wasn't prepared for. That must be why dreams exist.*

Tritia was absolutely not going to waste that precious human time between work hours doing Nod homework. She could. She had. But she didn't. Sometimes, due to and extremely overactive libido, she would find herself the nun in charge of discipline at a Catholic orphanage for girls. Sometimes, she would notice a loose tooth and end up pulling out every tooth in her mouth. She never knew what was going to happen, and she loved it that way. Lucidity was for control freaks, as far as she was concerned... *control freaks like Nyn who tremble at the thought of an event they don't expect and can't predict.*

\*

She found herself bewildered and sprinting through a city strewn with corpses, sand and broken glass. She was running away from a rider in black gothic armor on a white warhorse. She was unarmed, scared as hell, and sprinting in search patterns looking for the safety of a subway. But no overt entrances were in sight, and the rider was gaining fast.

She happened to glance at some of the faces of the dead as she ran. To her horror, she recognized them all. Every single one of the gruesome cadavers – some in piles against dumpsters and under stairs – every one of these distended faces (and part-faces) died by her *own* hand. She recoiled at the exploded heads of political advisors, familiar eye socket puncture wounds in certain bioengineers, exposed bowels of hapless undertrained bodyguards; all out of her conscience and into the streets. Guilt sickened her, unbalancing her judgement. No training was ineffective against *this*.

Corpse density steadily increased as the rider gained on her. There were now so many cadavers that she had to run on top of - and sometimes hurdle over - piles of them; feeling bones crack and gasbags burst beneath the balls of her feet when she launched or landed. Windows in skyscrapers above her began to rupture outwards and pour out waterfalls of corpses, glass, sand and blood into the streets below. She was slowing to a near-crawl, but she had to move as quickly and strategically as possible to evade all the falling corpses and debris. Alleyways which could have provided shelter were entirely cobwebbed over.

Hands shaking, heart pounding, acumen haywire. She tripped sideways and caught her foot in a sternum, somersaulting headwise into a blood-mottled sandbank full of ex-bodyguards.

The black rider caught up to her. A female voice, whose unfortunate soul had suffered to death long ago, was barking and echoing repeat warnings off the tall buildings in a stale British accent: “Do not attempt to stand on shifting sand. This is NOT a drill. Repeat: Do not attempt to stand on shifting sand or undesirable consciousness may occur! You have been warned. ... This is NIGWIM-1 Emergency Broadcast Procedure 13 ...

Do not attempt to stand on shifting sand. This is NOT a drill...” Over and over like that; soulless, relentless.

Nausea and paralysis overwhelmed her as the dark rider approached. He brandished what she’d originally thought was a polearm, but now it was close enough that she could make out it was a large black flag with a radiant white rose in the center. The rider seemed to rather enjoy waving that rose flag around with vigor and strange pride.

The rider stopped and looked around, surveying the swelling sea of corpses, and then turned its morbid black metal skull-visage towards her. She prepared to die.

Giving her a sudden, enthusiastic “thumbs up!”, she was promptly grabbed by the belt and lifted up onto the powerful white horse. Together, they rode furiously away from the city as it erupted, piled and festered with the guilty highlights of Tritia’s unmentionable career. They rode out into the countryside, where the piles of her reeking ex-clients grew more sparse. Still mortified and nauseous, but at least better able to breathe, she was starting to regain her wits a little. As they rapidly approached a riverbank with a ramshackle boat and a matching decrepit grey ferry-hag, they happened across a fat golden pope, who saw them and immediately fell to his knees in self-abjection. She had a bad gut feeling about the whole thing. Something urgent within told her that boat meant doom. She begged the rider to stop, she even tried punching it in the invincible ceramic skullface helmet a few times, but neither response nor any reaction whatsoever came. She said **fuck it** and jumped off backwards, thudding spinefirst into a muddy embankment; all the wind rushing out of her on impact. The horse and its black

metal rider turned and approached, waving the black and white rose flag with strange fervor.

When she finally gathered the breath and intention to scream, she screamed, “I don’t want to get on that boat! I’m not getting on that boat!”

The rider secured the flag to a ring in the saddle and slowly dismounted. The menacing black armor sounded dense and ceramic when its plates rubbed together. It walked right up to her, bent down, took her face in its cold gauntlet and held it forcefully inches from its own skeletal masque. There were human eyes behind the metal plates and splines, looking directly and unapologetically into all the secret areas of her soul. Too weak to consider other options, Tritia fully surrendered and went mentally, physically and emotionally limp.

Just as she reached her breaking point and willingly let her grip fail, the Man in White smiled behind his mask, knowing that, at that moment, he was speaking directly to a wide-open and voluntarily surrendered subconscious. *A rare opportunity, at best.*

He spoke with surprising undemonlike nasality.

“I want you to listen to me, Tritia. None of this is real. This is all in your head. This is all just a dream you’re having.”

He let go of her face and she collapsed back into the mud. He put his thumb and forefinger together and stretched them out, producing a single strand of spider web between them. He began balancing grains of sand on the web, trying to see how many grains it would take to break the web.

“What do you think? Ninety grains? Three-hundred-sixty?”

“Huh?” She whimpered, “Well if I’m dreaming, where’s my body right now?”

He suddenly leaned in close, grabbing her face again, this time with furious intensity, staring directly into and through her eyes. His voice dropped an octave and penetrated her core. “You’re drowning.”

\*

She woke up into a horrible slow-pitched scream with a distended expression of terror frozen on her face. But once she realized it had just been a dream, her face relaxed into a massively satisfied smile, and soon enough she was laughing all raspylike. She loved nightmares. Better and more interesting than any bungee jump, roller coaster and *sometimes* even better than a high altitude free fall. *Nightmares fucking rule.*

She grabbed a stash thong at random off the floor, sniffed it, checked it for previous stash, pulled it on and went over to her entertainment deck. She missed the decks back in the missile silo which had actually come with an oldschool Numark and a working pair of SL1200s, but she was afraid to even *think* about the silo because someone might be listening. She’d done plenty of listening herself, and Nod could be anywhere, supervising her retirement mission, deciding whether or not she gets to retire alive. She clutched and fondled the key around her neck for reassurance. This fiiiiiiiiine morning, she was in the mood for some **Tibetan deathcore**. She scanned through the titles, vertically rolling a rubbery scroll wheel next to a fluorescing aquamarine LCD screen. Danish Electrosubliminal, Jihadcore, Ninja Aggro, Samurai Corporate Battle Dirges... *ah here it is, Tibetan Deathcore. Go with the first one that comes up, uh... Bardo. Hey, that guy’s doing a show here. The buff as hell tattooed monk guy... Lamchen Norbu. Or is it Lungchen? All the Ogg says is “Bardo.” Oh well.* She hit play and headed for some strong caffeine.

The suite flooded with the strange combination of deep polyphonic spiritual chanting and psychotic, aggressive counterpoint loops. The most prominent of the three voices from one man's very muscular and dragon-inked throat was vocalizing something like highly intelligent, conscious deathcore while the other two lower voices canted backup with the same sutra in both Tibetan and Sanskrit. All of this plus long horns, cymbals, gongs and above all, black market Schrodinger clonetorture boxes hardwired to old analog amped bullhorn PAs; true to the ancient Waitsian traditions. Very cool shit. "Perfect," Tyt would say, "for waking up, realizing you're breathing, and getting your motherfucking warrior face on."

She gulped her triple strength coffee, drinking it painfully hot, but still gulping it nonetheless. She was always doing little masochistic things like drinking boiling hot triple strength coffee, jumping off of Aunt Mary sportbikes at eighty miles an hour into rush hour gridlock, or cleaning and stitching all of her own non-arterial combat wounds... doing these things made Tritia feel tempered, autonomous and hard to kill. If she didn't feel those things every minute on the job, she would certainly be victimized and murdered by the depraved minutae of her chosen career as an assassin with an undisclosed agenda. The thing was to always maintain an air of absolute professionalism... this way she could make use of an "ethical proxy" as those stiffies at NIC might say. See, the proxy gives *orders* which she is trained to trust and unquestioningly obey. If she commits any unethical acts during this process, fault is attributed to the proxy; she was just following orders. Her conscience is clean. Her employers would do the same, attributing fault to the communication or interpretation of the orders. But they don't even exist, so their conscience is clean no matter what. They'll



either have her free or dead in a matter of hours after any registered arrest or detainment, so none of that matters. *All that matters is to remain focused, tempered, autonomous and hard to kill. Infuckingtrepid.*

She filled her third mug and started thinking about ways to make Howard stop being. She felt guilty, but she knew her training would take over and unwaveringly cooperate with any direct order to eliminate a confirmed Messiah. She'd already read more than enough evidence in his journals to prove he was exactly the Messiah she was here to eliminate, sample and wrap. If she didn't make Howard die, she would never discover what it was the key around her neck unlocked... *All this cruel, soul-tainting, life-draining work NOW will be worth it LATER, and tenfold if I just hang in there and keep tolerating it until I've done my part and put in my kills. Just one more kill. Then I can retire.* She had her shit back together; and her heavily indoctrinated Will had once again vanquished her wild, desperate, hating-it-in-captivity Beast. She focused and let all the internal conflict fall off her shoulders. She got down to business immediately.

*Should I do this brains or brawn; planner or punisher? Hrm.* She picked up a flashpaper notepad and a pencil and started sketching out Lewis structures... little chemical diagrams. Just like Nyn himself had taught her before it caught on and everybody started kissing his ass. *Brains.* She connected Howard to Trin, Trin to Carne, Carne to Howard... *for a truly brilliant plan, everything was missing one multifunctional piece... Nyn. Connect Nyn somehow to Carne, then to Trin, and shazam, I go down in the history of Nod as Princess Smartass. It'll take crackerjack timing and a lot of play-by-play social engineering, but hell, I'm all over it.* She beamed to herself. She was going to show them all how it was done, *proper.*

She started making calls and messaging people. She registered Nyn in the local online golden ghetto thug market with a description that matched almost word for word an ad she was going to write later for Carne after encouraging him to rob Trin and deal the goods to Howard, and then scaring him shitless about the consequences of dealing his goods without help. She started spreading internet rumors and manipulating religious superstitions among the Palmers... making false LPMT connections. *Isomers, isomers, isomers...* After three hours and ten more cups of evil black sludge, Tritia had managed to build every possible isomer of the Howard situation with the outcome of Howard dying a horrible, mysterious, seemingly accidental death that had no apparent connection to the four hundred and seventy-three-or-so negligibly small interferences, suggestions, emails, conversations, bribes and so on, required to maintain those cause-effect chains through to their Howard-killing maturity. She tested it three times for holes, bugs and what-ifs. She finished getting suited up and pocketed a huge wad of paper money. She clipped her nickel-plated warhammer to her hip webbing, wrapped all frictionable moving parts in reusable urban charcoal stealthtape, and strode fearless out into the jungle.

Killing Howard *Brains*-style meant fanatic attention to detail, and to minor dynamics and changes among details. Brains-style meant stitching together a coincidental death. She had to go out into Howard's environment and covertly influence it to kill him for her... first by getting it in the right mood; influencing the values and consciousnesses of everyone who might come in contact with him the day of his death; then by conveniently leaving the tools to do her job around. Then it's all play-by-play, and time is the ultimate factor... it starts out you have, say, thirteen different isomers left by the time

you're within kill range of your mark. As things happen and time passes, some of those isomer paths come to dead ends and become impossible, exhausting that isomer in relation to the present moment and all possible moments that result from it. So it becomes a high-intensity race to keep her isomers alive in realtime by running around making phone calls, obstructing traffic, distracting people and so on. And by doing so, she guides all the right component parts of the reality surrounding her mark towards the fruition of her predicted result. In layman's terms, Death Magic.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Once upon a time,  
I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly,  
fluttering hither and thither,  
to all intents and purposes,  
a butterfly.  
I was conscious only of following my fancies  
as a butterfly,  
and was unconscious  
of my individuality  
as a man.  
Suddenly, I awoke,  
and there I lay,  
myself again.  
Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly,  
or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.*

*Chuang Tzu*

\* \* \*

The first time Tritia was here, she'd spent twelve minutes, twenty-four seconds trying to detect and disarm Howard's nonexistent home security system. Any place with no security system made her more cautious and paranoid than anything.

This time, she did a cursory bioscan, used her shiny new key, and walked right in. Visually scanning the room for something interesting, she paused, then went straight for the journal on the kitchenette counter. By touch alone, she turned intuitively to the most recent entry in the unmarked tome just like it was professional card magic.

Attack Dose #5; S5(P26-30)+S6(P31).

S5 musical tone = DGCD.

S6 musical tone = AG + CA.

I have achieved a (semi-?) permanent state of intensely aware tranquility. Some of the cube's lessons, in combination with my mental condition, have enabled me to perceive reality in a way no one else can. I feel that I have nearly mastered this cube and its contents. The once horrifying onset of this amazing drug no longer disturbs me... the key is to dislocate consciousness at first, and then to let the effects slowly, gently pervade consciousness... I believe that the awful trips at first are the result of too much consciousness-change too suddenly. The secret is to go psychologically limp and not resist anything... just... be nothing but aware.

Aware with a big fat capital A! To absolutely know and understand any concept, idea, person, place, animal, model, object, and so on, that is, to be one hundred percent aware of it - is exactly the same thing as **being** it. If you are 100% aware of a cup, then you are that cup. With full mastery of your awareness, you can be whatever or whomever or wherever or whenever you want. However, you must not get caught up in being any particular you, since the real you is nothing but aware.

While Tritia squinted and mouthed these badly handscrawled words, Howard was

blissfully slumping back into a plastic seat in the last car of the southbound green line; his eyes half-closing. He was almost entirely aware of the entire train, and of everything and everyone in it. The novel interactions between the Other Place and the mundane subway-reality were infinitely amusing him. He could clearly see the beings native to the Other Place walking around and interacting with some sort of infinitely complex technology... *strange, complex machines of very similar design to the LPMT cubes*. These beings were definitely not the blue-skinned, many-armed, sedated-looking deities of the Hindu pantheon from common urban legends - as typically reported by cousins of friends of distant relatives, who had allegedly run the spiritual gauntlet of the six attack doses and come back, bodhisattva-style, to talk about it.

Urban legends described the inhabitants of the Other Place as everything from aliens to monsters; from angels to demons; from gods to ghosts. But now Howard saw them clearly... awkward, slow, porous cartilage-people interacting in some bizarre way with their nightmarishly complex cryptomechanical devices. He was in a state of pure bliss that was cracking a ridiculous half-smile across his sleepy face. *This is the kind of thing Faust was after*. He knew that for some reason, he wasn't 100% aware, and that his face itched inexplicably. But still, he was metaphysically identical to everyone and everything on the train, and the train itself, and even the air and dirt in it... He was all of it. He loved all of it. He could read the Chinese newspaper held by the thirty-two year old woman who was sitting two cars down, and who was on her way to work at a yogurt company, because he *was* that woman. He could even feel her get uncomfortable and shift ass cheeks, and could hear the thoughts in her head in a female Cantonese internal dialogue. He shifted out of the woman's specific awareness and was again almost fully

aware of the train. He knew the faces, moods, intentions and fears of everyone who had ever tagged its walls, why they did it, and what they were wearing that day. His face itched. His brow and cheeks were hot and sweaty. Something felt wrong. He watched the subway tunnel blackout coming through the awareness of those in the first car, and then came six seconds of surreal darkness and clacking haunted by porous psychedelic ghosts. But he knew he was still not aware of something... something *important*. He deduced that it must have something to do with him, since he was the entire train, but he was also observing the train through the awareness of specific parts of the train. Suddenly, he remembered ***I am nothing but aware*** and refocused... feeling the problem-solving tension in his neck, chest and arms drip off of him as he exhaled.

*The hot, sweaty itchy feeling on my face. **That's** what it is. That's the tiny fraction of the train that I don't know, don't understand, am not, don't love...*

Palmers of Light in every major city were dropping their “ARE YOU READY FOR THE NEW AWARENESS?” placards; collapsing on sidewalks, streets and floors; experiencing spiritual seizures as inexplicable as they were severe. Everyone in these cities could sense the exact same abstract impending strangeness: a vague feeling that something disruptive and incomprehensible was about to transpire. Reality seemed to be twisting. Even the Dark Shaolin could feel its imminence. In Phat Boy's kitchen, MC Rudebwoi was cooking phatfries in a freestyle trance, flowing,

*"...which brings me to point six. The real bitch is that a stitch in spacetime is a crime if ya brainfry be richer than Richie Richard like Montalban on Fantasy L-P-M-T Island I aint playin Brains are fryin I aint lyin all I'm sayin is the Real can be a bitch sometimes but why ya whinin? All I'm sayin is that if ya got an itch, ya gotta scratch it, all I'm*

*sayin is that if ya got an itch, ya gotta scratch it, all I'm  
sayin is that if ya got an itch, ya gotta scratch it, scratch it,  
scratch it, scratch it..."*

Not so coincidentally reaching up to scratch it, your fingers collide prematurely with a large, angular piece of equipment that seems to be attached to your face, over your *real* eyes and ears, and you feel this with an entirely different set of fingers. *Fingers that seem more familiar, more real, more 'me.'* The equipment is invisible somehow, since all you can see is the inside of the train. You grab the equipment with both hands and, still looking around, you instinctively locate and depress two oval buttons on either side of your head. You feel the gear predictably unlock, and as you slowly pull it away from your face, you watch the train scene blur out of focus and shrink. The entire train's interior flips upside down and backwards as you slowly pull the gear off and away from your eyes. You see it now - some sort of virtual reality headgear apparatus, held by strangely familiar first person hands. You examine the headgear more closely, immediately recognizing its exquisite cryptomechanical elements of style and design. You witness the same mind-bending architecture everywhere; indeed, all Other Place technology seems to be compositely constructed out of it. Your mind unclouds, your visual faculties stabilize, your memories awaken, and you remember **everything**.

\* \* \*

Tritia found the handwriting more and more difficult to read; the material harder and harder to follow. She was even starting to doubt her senses... *maybe the handwriting wasn't that bad... it would be easier to read if it didn't writhe three-dimensionally on the*



*page...*

Developing a conscious acceptance/rejection mental reflex for certain philosophical/metaphysical concepts, and possibly even perceptual stimuli, will allow a mind to willfully integrate certain concepts into its gestalt {beliefs-values-knowledge} system and force them to accommodate and reorganize accordingly, rather than allowing the existing structure to control which concepts it will accept and which concepts it will filter out. This is one of three mental reflexes fundamental to the discipline called "conscious user-reconstructive self-engineering." I, however, regret nothing. Faust was a pussy.

Tritia sat down at Howard's computer and sighed. *NOW I'm going to have to kill him.* She scanned Howard's unwitting handwritten confession to successful self-evolution, encrypted it, and buried it steganographically in an ogg file – [Tibetan Deathcore] Lamchen Norbu & Bardo – Svaha! (DJ Preta remix).ogg. She made sure she wasn't near a window, turned on passive upload, and sent Free Tibet's deathcore sensation - with Howard's confession stashed up his rectal - to the Piezo-Ogg chipset glued to the thick skullbone nub behind her ear.

She glanced down at a different book sitting next to the monitor. Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality. She opened randomly to page 26.

*"Creativity is the principle of novelty. Creativity introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The creative advance is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates. The ultimate metaphysical principle is the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction. The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the 'many' which it finds and also it is one among the disjunctive 'many' which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one, and are increased by one..."*

*Whoa.*

\* \* \*

"Howard Glass" was just a game you've been playing for a short time. You're in a gaming den, playing a game. It came out a little while ago and everyone went crazy over it. This game thrusts you into the consciousness of a fetal "human." You gestate, are born, and you experience and manipulate your human life, deal with the rules of the environment, that sort of thing. Standard plot, really. But this game in particular was the first and most successful class III simulator - that is, a simulator with a psy-clouder cryptodilemma which makes you forget you're playing a game, thereby completely engrossing you in its illusion with no imposing player ego to speak of.

*Entirely fooled.*

When the game was given to the people, several prominent philosophers tried it and then committed suicide within a month. Their death speeches all said basically the

same thing;

*"If we are capable of creating artificial reality; a VR that can entirely convince consciousness, then it is probable that this reality right now is also an entirely convincing VR. And if our game ends and we wake up from this, the reality we awaken is also probably VR, and so on, and so on, ad infinitum. We must therefore conclude that any reality in which we are immersed at any given moment is most likely virtual."*

Philosophers really do leave suicide notes like that. Or so you've been reading.

You look around the den and laugh. *What a great game.* Somehow, your consciousness must have found a way to hack or subvert the psy-clouder dilemmas while *in-game*, and while fully clouded. You've been developing a genius humanoid with latent schizophrenia. You feed it a steady diet of entheogenic chemicals, called LPMT, LSD, Psilocybin, DMT and Mescaline, and existentialist word-software, called Sartre, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, just to see what will happen. In an immersive game like this, you need to condition those choices into your habits beforehand, since your consciousness will be entirely submerged in your character, and therefore incapable of precise intervention. "Howard" is a mutated manifestation of your game-playing will... Howard is the *Maya* of your *Lila*. The power of your own consciousness to decrypt or circumvent the psy-clouder's supposedly unresolvable dilemmas had possibly been catalyzed by the intelligence, schizophrenia, heavy entheogen use and metaphysical obsession with free will on the part of the consciousness of your character, Howard. *Interesting.*

You see others who appear to be fully immersed in various Class II and III realities – someone you recognize is across the room playing Booju, where they're

directly experiencing what it's like to be theoretical geometry for ten thousand years. Others play at being deepspace sentient hunterseeker viruses, silicon-based invertebrate soldiers, infinitely wise alien plant life, and so on. You check out your fellow players at the other terminals and wonder whether any of them are playing Talia, or whether Talia's player has a higher-level player.

*Butterfly, or man?*

You shake your head in awe; cooing with delight as you eagerly replace the visor. The train scene refocuses, the psy-clouder dilemmas re-engage your reason, and the game den reality completely erases itself from your mind, forever.

\* \* \*

Howard wondered what just happened to him. He could still clearly see the many ghosts of the Other Place and their odd mechanical devices, but he was no longer hyper-aware. He mentally backtracked... *I was hyper-aware. I was itchy, I scratched my face, then I think I blacked out for a couple of minutes...* He thought about it for a moment, and then, slowly, reached up to feel his face...

Nosebleed.

He staggered to his feet and got off at Qin, trying at first to crawl up the steep flight of stairs and failing miserably. Defeated, he slumped down against the wall where disorientation and dizziness started kicking his ass. *What the fuck is going on?* He couldn't deal with the overlapping effect in this particular area at all. Everything was wrong. Nothing made any sense.

Strange apparitions slithered along impossible vertices all around him. Suddenly, there was a crazed, grizzled face directly in front of his, yelling something out of synch with its lips and occasionally spitting tiny sparkling antigravity jewels as it hollered, "Don't do it! Don't figure it out! They'll kill you if you figure it out! Don't do it, Howard... Go back to sleep! Go back to sleep! Go back to sleep!" And as Howard's consciousness went black from all the excitement, he lucid-dreamed that his body was glowing and losing solidity.

Consciousness came and went. There were images of strangers in the subway station whose eyes were angry black holes; overlapped with almost-as-real cartilage aliens, who now seemed vaguely familiar, doing strange things to even stranger crypto-machines. He tried to glean the meaning of the 'black holes for eyes' idea, but the images of strangers grew more and more aggressive as he tried. Then he was a bright glowing liquid for a little while, and nothing made any sense, yet, accepting that, everything made perfect sense.

Then the unspeakable happened thirty-six times per second in a circular-infinite six-second loop, forcing Howard to multithread his existence and live out nine simultaneous incarnations as monks in every Eastern pro-enlightenment discipline. By the time the first monk-Howard's spiritual weasel went pop in Cambodia, Howards all over Southeast Asia were spontaneously rewiring their neurocircuitry in a chain reaction that drew an equilateral triangle from India, through China and Korea to Japan, through the Philippines to Indonesia, through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Free Nepal back to India. The sheer magnitude of this unimaginable event tore spacetime a new asshole, and Howard broke free of the six-second loop and realized it had all been in his head.

Then he thought maybe some of the people with black holes for eyes attacked him, and he defended himself by becoming a formless glowing liquid again; dissolving the essence of who he was into that liquid, and casually just free-floating away from it all, out into deep space.

\* \* \*

Tritia heard the elevator stop at Howard's floor, ping, and grind open. She immediately started packing up her gear when she recognized the sounds of two people. She scrutinized the noises as she made a move for the balcony... *sounds like... Talia and Howard... or, rather, Talia trying to **carry** Howard. Shit. Balcony. Disappear...*

\* \* \*

The bright white luminous liquid-formerly-known-as-Howard formlessly floated through some remote nebulaic part of the cosmos, bending the space-time around him with the awesome gravity of his new-found love of the Universe. He felt like a sun's ejaculate. He swam at speeds unknown past a dark red nebula that was giving slow-motion birth to twin red giants; past earth-sized carbon spheres; past a bottle with an old yellowed piece of paper in it; past radiant pulsars; past ... *wait... A message in a bottle?!*

The shining liquid-that-was-Howard did an awkward gelatinous backstroke and returned almost instantly to the bottle. Protruding a brilliant, opalescent tentacle from his center, he retrieved the paper and held it up to his glow. It read:

*Howard,*

Hope you don't mind... I figured this was the most secure and private way to tell you this.

I had some time to get my head together following our lunch meeting the other day. I've changed my mind. You're going to destabilize reality for everyone. Don't do it.

Oh, and p.s. ... professionals are in town to kill you. Two of them. I'll do what I can, but my influence is often misinterpreted by the symbolic systems of murderers, so I really can't promise anything.

p.p.s. **Don't do it.** Dream and reality must remain binary. Trust me on this.

*Nigwim-1*

The intellectual shrapnel left over from Howard's ego-death; dispersed in a heterogenous suspension throughout the brilliant liquid, went: "Bullshit!" and then, "Bullshit! Bullshit!! Bullshit!!!"

But then a novelty thought occurred and re-dissolved most of his ego, so he headed for the nearest black hole. He found its pull was relentless and terrifying. Like a drowning nightmare... absolutely nothing he could do would reverse the mistake. It was slow, but slowly accelerating. Liquid-Howard suddenly felt the inevitability of death by infinite elongation. *What a stupid idea this was.*

He felt the idea, "What a stupid idea this was," get ripped away from himself and

sucked into the black hole, where it ceased to have ever existed. *I just had an idea of some kind and the hole ate it.* Also eaten. *I don't understand what's happening.* Also devoured and erased ...

And the bright, luminous white liquid-that-was-Howard was sucked into a thread-thin luminous strand; spiraling into absolute nonexistence.

\* \* \*

Ninety minutes of what might medically qualify as brain-death. Then, a gulp of air that felt more like a gulp of mud. Then someone's blurry, candlelit ceiling.

"You're awake." *A female voice. Somewhat familiar. Possibly generated from the orange beings of light dancing riotously on the ceiling-like surface.* He nodded "yes," then seriously doubted whether he was awake or not. He heard a 1950's male actor voice talking about black holes and he let his head fall to one side. Images of stars and galaxies on TV. *Much more familiar.*

Talia kept her voice low. "I left the space channel on for you. I thought it might relax you. I know most of you genius types like space."

His throat made a crackling, bubbling noise like butter being electrocuted. He still forgot that his voice didn't work from time to time.

She tried again. "Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am?"

He scanned the room. He was on a futon couch. There were red candles, and a TV with space in it. Numerous martial arts weapons, a canvas punching bag that looked like it had been dab-painted with wet rusty fist-shaped sponges, some kind of shrine or



altar with more candles, incense and statuettes. *No books*. Red wine. Black furniture.

He shook his head "no" and gurgle-choked.

"This is my apartment. Your apartment is next door. I'm your neighbor. My name's Talia."

He nodded "yes," then put a fist up to his forehead and poked out his index finger.

"You understand. Good. Do you need water or anything? When I found you, you kept pointing to yourself and signing "water" and "light," so I thought you needed water or something, but you wouldn't drink. Um, you didn't have keys, so I brought you in here. You've been there for about uh, five hours."

He slowly signed, "You find me where?"

"I was on my way back from Ken Sing Tan, waiting for the subway at Qin Station and you came staggering out of the fucking tunnel! Swear to god. You crawled up to the platform and started going up to people and grabbing their faces and looking into their eyes like THIS," Talia grabbed an imaginary face and stared into it maniacally. "Then a couple of Asuras saw you and jumped you, so I beat them down and brought you home. Didn't kill any though. Asuras are slippery little bastards. Anyway, crazy fucking day. "

Signed: "Thank you."

"No problem. Besides, the Asuras and the Dark Shaolin and the Ronin and all of those violent assholes make me puke. It's martial arts blasphemy. *Motherfuckers*. When I get my sword, it's getting christened with their fucking blood."

Signed: "For-you I pay-back favor how?"

"Oh shit, yeah, did you get my notes? You wouldn't happen to know where I can find a... first edition German copy of a book called, just sec ..." She pulled out a piece of

paper, and screwed up her face in phonetic agony. "Also ... sprACK... zero-thrusta?"

*Just when I think nothing else can surprise me....* He signed: "Yes. Why?"

"Holy shit, are you serious? You're not serious!"

Signed: "Yes. True. Why?"

"Okay look this guy Trin says he can hook me up with ... wait for it ... wait for it... a signed fucking Muramasa! And for price I can actually afford. Only catch is, I have to find him that book. What's that book worth anyway?"

Signed: "Around \$750,000, with autograph." Talia counted the number of times he emmed his palm. "Mine have autograph. Like your sword." *Maybe now she'll shut up about the fucking pills and stop spamming my doorcrack*, he thought. He visually imagined where it sat on his bookshelf right at this moment as Talia's face went pale.

"Fuck me! You HAVE one?! That price would explain the discount I'm getting. I don't suppose there's any way you'd give it to me for saving your life, is there?"

Signed: "OK OK but me want slightly more."

"I'm listening. What else do you need?"

The sign for "dreaming," then a pause, then he fingerspelled: "L.P.M.T."

"You know that means the death penalty, right?"

Howard shrugged and mentally improvised a freestyle freedom-mantra to keep his subconscious clean and free from Talia's unaware transmission of this federal propaganda meme-virus. *I do not compromise with terrorists. Drug war people are terrorists. No deterrent can influence my free choice. The more arrogant the deterrent, the more my disgusted soul refuses to comply.*

Talia noticed in Howard's face that he was extremely unimpressed with her

comment for some reason. She put Conversational Item “*You get the death penalty for LPMT*” in Thought Quarantine, pending review. “Okay ...” She closed all of her blinds and disconnected her VOIP-phone. “I’m pretty sure Trin only wants the container back anyway. You can keep whatever’s in there if you can get it all out...”

Howard made the sign for “already done that;” and then, “NEED one more medicine-pill. Need only one more.”

Talia understood. She turned up the volume on the TV, double-checked her basic surveillance countermeasures, and in a low, hushed voice, she told him: “I know this guy. I saw him today actually. He has some. I have his pager.”

She produced a business card and mouthed the number absently to herself, trying to memorize it. Howard recognized the number, nodded, and signed, “C A R N E.”

“You know him? Oh, wait, of course you know him. You’re off your tits every time I see you. Right. So listen, I set up this deal, and you give me that book, OK?”

Signed: “OK. One book trade-for one medicine-pill.”

“Deal.” Talia’s heart was thudding. She hoped Carne had the business acumen to have somehow pinched an extra pill or two.

When Howard could stand, they both went next door to get the book and the empty puzzle cube from his apartment. Just as they both realized that Howard had either lost his keys or locked them inside, Talia spotted an unnatural shine on the frontmost tumbler in Howard’s deadbolt. She made a sign for quiet, quickly picked the lock, drew her tanto and slipped aggressively into the room. The balcony door was unlocked, but there was no sign of anyone still present. After a cursory search, she went with her instincts, took Howard’s hand and ushered him gently inside.

As Talia graciously accepted the first edition Nietzsche and the emptied Fantasy cube, they both caught the faintest scent of girl sweat in the air, and tingled.

\* \* \*

“Geisha” means something like “professional entertainer” in Japanese. But in Yakuzanese, it means something more like “\$2500 a night whore.”

Traditional geishawear features light-colored silk kimonos, with big-ass hair and chopstick-sized hairpins (which are occasionally sharpened and/or poisoned.) They wear little shoes and plaster their faces with white pancake makeup and way too much blush. They look like freaky ghost dolls because their seven hundred year-old ancestors found the look to be the very definition of hot, sweet and innocent. NeoNihonto culture has such an engrained sense of traditionalism that, with the exception of the Scottish game of golf, the palates of the rich really don’t change. It’s still swords, rice wine and girls with tiny feet and huge hair. *What’s good enough for my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather is good enough for me.*

The Yakuza, on the other hand, have always been cultural innovators with less antediluvian tastes. They still uphold most of the fundamental elements of ancient warrior culture: their katanas are still the seats of their souls, family is still all-important to them, and the Bushido is still a subject held in deadly unsnickerishness. However, they have allowed the details of their traditions to catch up to modern times. Their warhorses are 1500cc sport bikes with integral locking scabbards. Their war poetry is expressed as code, which is well known worldwide as the ultimate in crackersoft. And their geisha...

absolutely nothing like the phantom posture-obsessed tea-serving types enjoyed by their ancestors.

The Yakuza is a very powerful, very ferocious Oriental demon. A mythical, many-armed god of the underworld who brings prosperity and decadence to its devotees, and instant, violent death to its enemies. Its geisha look and behave like the ideal beings suited to the task of satisfying the sexual appetites of such a demon. Though Yakuza-geisha were a popular manga motif, the best computer-interfaced hentai animators on the planet could never successfully call out a samurai corporation with a bottomless budget and indentured genetic engineers in a battle of freestyle hottie creation. Since bioengineered materials remain property of the corporations that engineer them, this is unfortunately a quote unquote 'ethical non-issue,' according to the self-created laws of global economics. The Demon's sexual appetite tends towards two distinct palates; Yin and Yang, and it is said that the best threesomes are with one of each.

The Yin appetite is of the *'I can't believe something this twisted excites me but Jesus does it ever'* variety. Yin Yakuza-geisha are engineered in this context; creatures precision-engineered for the satisfaction of increasingly libertine sexual novelty. Submissive, trusting, friendly, fragile, hyper-feminine girls with childlike, naturally hairless bodies, artificially raised voices, hyperactive pheromones and rescented sweat glands, genetically programmed Freudian oral complexes and impossibly large eyes. In the presence of a naked Yin Yakuza-geisha, 81% of tested males lost all sexual inhibitory functions within three minutes, and 12% immediately violated the poor girl after only one whiff of the triple pheromones involuntarily released by her fragrant sweat glands. One can easily understand why they're used as intelligence weapons to bait, spy on, occupy

and distract the enemy. It is rumored that the 47 Ronin are always trying to steal the Yakuza's Yin geishas, Gypsy-style, and turn them into ghoulish shaved and tattooed sex slaves trained to lovingly lick their masters' weapons clean.

The Yang appetite is of the *'tireless lusty sporty aggressive stereotypically hot and supernaturally talented'* type. The female main character in any violent manga, more or less. Yang Yakuza-geisha are engineered in this context; creatures precision-engineered to challenge, dominate, resist and put to the test the Japanese male libido, but ultimately to be conquered by an indomitable virility with a \$500-a-month powdered tiger penis and boiled polar bear gall bladder habit. Think prehensile Kegel muscles. Think pussies with little tongues in them. Think flavored saliva. Think girls who always have multiple orgasms every time, no matter how incompetent their partner. Girls genetically incapable of being hurt or insulted. Tireless, naturally feverish, genetically enhanced sporty types with no temperance to speak of. Yang Yakuza-geisha sometimes double as extra security when needed, donning webbing-netted black leather tactical fetish gear.

Watching a Yang geisha dominate a Yin geisha is an event that will reshape a person's sexuality from the fundamental architecture outwards. Participating in such an event is known to cause serious and irreversible libidinal damage...

Carne was lying in the center of a large circular bed of crust-spotted red and black satin between two of these binary demon concubines, recovering from a long night of being professionally satisfied by them in tandem; drinking comedic volumes of expensive sake, and smoking the Yakuza's own genetically modified opium out of some angular black metal device. His memories of the evening were a spastic mess of pornographic

images and sounds, unrelated to one another. It was like watching a Japanese art film that had been edited by drunken chimpanzees. Lots of drugs, psychotic sex noises, exciting and disturbing leaps of depravity-bravado, blackouts, forcing down more hot sake, gooey faces, whimpers, screams, moans and total abandon.

He felt brain damaged. He couldn't follow his own thoughts for more than three seconds without forgetting what he had been thinking about. His mental chatter had a severe vocabulary deficiency. He would start talking to himself in his head and forget the Spanish word he wanted, then the English word would show up in its place, but he didn't know what that word meant in Spanish. He would try to remember what the English word meant and forget what he was thinking about in the process.

He was severely hung over and paranoid in the penthouse suite of the Rinzai, a monolithic tower of ominous black glassteel full of traveling CEOs, politicians and Yakuza. The buttons in the elevator didn't even have Arabic numerals on them. As his senses slowly returned to him, he began to develop more than a bit of a doomed feeling. Maybe the demon doesn't particularly *want* a Latino dawg in his house, no less in bed with two of his favorite concubines. Carne's motor skills still didn't work properly, but he was resolved to bust ass out of there as soon as he had the faculties to at least put his pants on.

*"Maybe I shouldn't take the elevator. I should take the... um... shit, what's the word... it's um, 'stairs' in English, but what does that word mean in Spanish again? Wait... why am I thinking about stairs again? Ah fuck it."* His pager went off, chiming a MIDI-rendered version of "Viva El Toro." It scared his central nervous system into a full-body spasm that flipped him over Tui, the Yin geisha on his right, over the edge of

the bed and onto the floor. Both girls giggled at him. He fumbled and dropped the pager three times before finally finding and depressing the grey button that displayed the number and silenced the 8-bit El Toro. It was a local number he didn't recognize, with - 911 tacked on the end for 'urgent.' He crawled over to the phone and dialed. A female voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Yo, who's this? You page me?"

"Hey Carne, yeah, it's Talia."

"Tal- oh hey - wassup girl? You feeling okay? J'you sound like it's suicide hotline, yo." He looked into Tui's impossibly huge aquamarine eyes while she gave him a pouty look and masturbated idly. Carne forgot why he was on the phone.

Talia just sighed and grew annoyed at the long pause. "Carne, remember that Fantasy you had?"

*Wha?* "Damn, girl, which one? I think I just took care of them all. Oh, wait, unless you mean that one where you're in this schoolgirl unif-"

"No no no, the LPMT. You remember the LPMT?"

"Uh, yeah, why?"

"Tell me you have more where that came from."

"Nah, that was it. One time thing. Why?" The phone's speaker squelched with a frustrated scream that made Carne change ears.

"You know that guy... Howard... the guy who I gave the puzzle box to so he could crack it? ... You still there Carne?"

"I'm listening." Carne was definitely listening.



"Well, um, he wants one more of those pills. Really **really** badly."

Carne was suspicious. "Wait. What did he do with the ones he took out of box? There were, like, thirty-five pills in there, right?" He'd heard this line of counter-interrogation many times before.

"Gave them back to Trin and collected the three-kay difference," Talia lied.

"So how many does he want again? Just one?"

"Just one."

Carne thought about it. It had actually been a one-time thing. He probably couldn't get in touch with the guy again. The easiest way would be to somehow pinch it off Trin. *By any means necessary*. "And how much is he willing to pay?"

"He said standard price, I don't remember exactly. Want me to ask him?"

"Ballpark."

She winced in thought. "Um, about... a hundred and fifty. Yeah. Hundred and fifty. That was it."

Carne felt the all blood fall out of his head. His mind suddenly went very sober and his mouth dried up. "Wait. You just said **one** pill... at a **hundred** and **fifty**? **Thousand**?" He made white-knuckled fists and tried not to explode.

"Yeah." Talia's phone speaker squelched with a blast of Spanish obscenities with the word *Trin* and *mato* repeated several times.. Mysterious sexy giggling in the background. "Carne? You OK? You still there?"

"Yeah I'm fucking still here. That puta motherfuck-ass lowballed me at like 10 bucks a fucking pill. I'm'a kill that piece of shit. OK. I'll get some more. I'll call you back. You stay put."

“OK thanks Carne.”

“Yeah.” He shattered the plastic phone hanging it up. He scrambled and tripped all over the place trying to get dressed while ranting out loud in Spanish... “You don’t cheat a Latino, you don’t fucking steal from a Latino...”

The girls just lay there watching with passive amusement, teasing each other demurely. Carne tore ass out the door and down twenty-five flights of stairs in one continuous motion.

\* \* \*

While Howard was doing catatonic battle with his hangover at 7:33am the next morning, Talia was sitting up against what was left of Trin's Import and Export, clutching her bag of rare and exotic treasure like a protective mother ape. At 8:01, the riot door opened from inside and woke her up. She tried to make eye contact with Trin through the cracked and smoke-blackened security glass, but he avoided her and stoically withdrew into the mostly destroyed shop. Still, it was in her nature to come skipping into the store with full-on enthusiasm, plunking down the cube, the book and the credit card with a giant, mischievous grin.

Trin didn't speak. He snatched up the cube and examined it, and then sighed.

"What you want?"

"Hey Trin, nice to see you too. How much do you want for that pill?"

"Not for sale."

"C'mon Trin, how much? What do you want then?"

"Not for sale!" Trin was serious.

"Jesus Trin, what happened to your store? I've never seen you like this." Her enthusiasm was fading, and the resulting clarity was showing her the terrible details of the situation. Trin was badly fucked up. Cut. Beaten. Burned. The store was razed.

"Your sword is gone. My pill is gone. Everything gone! I have no need of these things. Get out! Never come back! Tell your friends to never come back either! Getdafuckout!!" Trin was shaking and crying as he screamed at her.

Talia grabbed the book at the expense of the cube and stormed out in a tantrum of her own. She went to a dim and claustrophobic little place at the edge of Ken Sing Tan market, sobbingly picked up the most expensive bottle of port she could find and wept, wept, wept angrily at god all the way home.

## Chapter Fifteen

All of Tritia's recon data for her final retirement job pointed to a man called Howard. An urban hermit who was apparently once some kind of supergenius. That morning, Nod had sent her a sealed dossier by disposable courier. Inside was a fat stack of data on multi-spectral subjects touching on everything from Howard's profile to cults and metaphysics to the apocalypse and bioterror agent delivery systems. But the Howard she was observing didn't seem physically capable of nerve gassing a shopping mall. The Howard she knew so far was a complete and utter washout of a man capable of nothing important or salient to her mission. She browsed through the dossier over coffee, re-checking her profile on Howard for possible inconsistencies.

Subject HOWARD GLASS appears to be mute. May have trained at K'an Monastery, but shows no overt combat ability. Primary form of communication: American Sign Language; only with neighbor TALIA O'REILLY, who is neither deaf nor mute. Subject has no telephone service, no cable television service, does not listen to music or radio, and does not read newspapers or magazines. Subject only leaves his apartment to shop for essentials. Subject is a 2.2 on the Beaufice Psychological Stability Scale, due to extensive and voluntary abuse of mixed entheogenic materials. Subject is typically under the influence of LSD-25, psilocybin, mescaline or DMT. Subject has demonstrated an interest in LPMT. Subject has a gigabit ethernet pipeline, but only uses the internet

for mathematical, scientific and philosophical research. Subject does not correspond with anyone but neighbor TALIA, and never uses email, nntp, irc, p2p or messaging of any kind. Subject is omnivorous, and prefers to eat simple, bland, macrobiotic foods such as Tibetan porridge with ghee. Subject does not carry visible weaponry, and demonstrates zero hostility.

Subject seems to have little or no recoverable assets. (less than \$300 liquidated.) Obviously, marketing does not reach this individual.

Subject is worshiped by a 62-member local cell of an America-wide cult called THE PALMERS OF LIGHT, who believe him to be a psychedelic MESSIAH. Due to subject's extreme social isolation, he does not appear to be aware of this cult. The PALMERS are best known for winning the *Palmers of Light v. Hendrickson* Case in the Supreme Court, establishing all psychoactive plants as religious sacraments in North America, provided you are a member of the PALMERS. (Recent reports suggest that the best way to influence a PALMER is to tighten up on the flexibility of their spiritual immunity from drug war persecution.)

*Accuse them of dealing to non-Palmers*, she thought automatically, but she couldn't, wouldn't **dare** write that into the file.

The PALMERS believe that subject HOWARD has the ability to perceive and experience non-subjective reality. That is to say he somehow has the potential to witness "true" reality, which lies *behind* the commonplace

reality to which so-called ‘sleepers’ are accustomed.

The dossier also included a chunk of propaganda from a Palmers publication; proof that they intend to sociologically manipulate the public at large. Proof that Howard is, in fact, a central figure in their mythos.

You are the very model of causality in general, and yet, you are a consciousness provided with free will, which, while you can’t **directly** will an instantaneous result, nor cause a preconceived event in detail, your innate power to **influence** reality with sheer intent remains your most powerful and novel birthright as an incarnated creator.

The weakest-willed are, therefore, hapless devices of the urban domestication routine; sad creatures of monotonous habit. Those who allow their wills to atrophy in the name of comfortable security become predictable as the identical monkeys in clone zoos who never masturbate or throw feces, who are essentially tamed by conscienceless stepmother biotech while our human sleepers in effect tame one other using more sinister devices like work ethic, morality, dogma, etiquette, dresscode, reputation-defense and profit-motive. Those gifted with stronger wills and enormous self-faith effect much greater influence over the

realities in which they are immersed. However, the empowered will must be tamed. They who exercise their will indiscriminately tend to effect greater and greater turbulence around them. Friction. Conflict. The indiscriminate creator also creates an imbalanced **internal** turbulence; a sucking emptiness which always demands that its host exercise free will as often as possible, in order to fill it with consumable surrogate equilibria while further unbalancing the surrounding reality. Those with the strongest self-responsible wills are messiahs, and are capable of seeing through the Veil, as Howard shall.

- From *The New Book of Reality*, Palmers Press, Teedot.

*Oh shit*, she thought to herself as she skipped ahead to a dissection of the Palmers' views on consciousness...

The PALMERS OF LIGHT appear to believe that all of the consciousness in the Universe falls into two distinct categories: *square* consciousness and *circular* consciousness. Each of these types of consciousness fulfils an important and dynamic function in the continued existence and expansion of the universe. First, the PALMERS believe very strongly that “consciousness creates form,” and not the other way around. If there were no consciousness, there would be no matter, no order, and no pattern. A consciousness, or several consciousnesses collectively,

conceive an idea, and THEN that idea exists in the universe. They claim that perception is a creative act... that they are **creating** the reality they perceive *while* they're perceiving it. They believe that the Big Bang was an infinity of absolute nothingness which became conscious spontaneously, and its first idea was that of light, spawning a massively energetic explosion of light, considering there were no other ideas to resist it at the nontime. Among the first ideas were those such as energy, space, transformation, luminosity, divergence, curvature and movement. The first "rules" or ideas to organize ideas, restrict their influence, and get them to interact in a co-operative way, were concepts like minimum, maximum, equilibrium, threshold, capacity, limit and heat-death. Each original idea thereafter created more and more variety in the rapidly expanding universe, but also synchronously resulted in more and more governing concepts, usually manifesting out of routine resistance to the newest ideas, (since all ideas need to co-operate in order to co-exist.) The first ideas and rules became the building blocks of the universe, as well as a yin-yang-like polar-dynamic interplay between **chaotic** ideas, (such as the creation of a unique expression) and **organizing** ones, (such as the influence of probabilities on one's immediate decision to act.) The PALMERS believe that the universe will continue to expand and diversify so long as original, creative ideas are being created by consciousness. This is where circular and square consciousness become important...

Circular consciousness, or "creator" consciousness, is chaotic. It is



that which **expands** the universe by the creation of new, original ideas. In modern human terms, this means artists, schizophrenics, mystics, inventors, hallucinogen users and so on. They are the gods of this universe as they continue to create it despite overwhelming evidence that every conceivable idea has already been created, copyrighted, defiled by marketers and milked to death. The circles represent creative chaos or *Lila*.

Square consciousness, or “destroyer” consciousness, is organizing. It is that which **contracts** the universe by committing its phenomena to form by freezing, crystallizing and inhibitory processes; and also that which resists, punishes, sabotages or impedes the creation of new and original ideas. In modern terms, this means organized religion, conservative politicians, police, lawyers, prescriptive psychiatry, drug wars, law enforcement, global economics, and certain selfish and unethical branches of profit-suckling science. The squares represent the enforcement of the illusion of order, the illusion of predictable reality, the illusion of consistent repetition; the illusion of security. Basically, it is a suppressive, domination-flavored *Maya*.

Everything created by circular consciousness is thought to be somehow circular or spherical in form: planets, drops of water, eyeballs, aikido, Pi, kinesics, wheels, suns, brains, and so on. Everything created by square consciousness is thought to be somehow square, cubic or rectangular in form: skyscrapers, circuitry, houses, roads, paper, guns,

swords, tools, computers, prisons, matrices, etc. Left unchecked, the circles will gradually turn everything square into a circular form for the sake of utility in the *Shiva* sense (back to raw materials with which to create.) This is evident if one leaves a rectangular stone building to the elements for several thousand years. Left unchecked, the squares will gradually turn everything circular into a square form for the sake of utility in the practical sense, as is evident shortly after a lumber company discovers a rainforest.

The PALMERS believe that subject HOWARD is the single most powerful circular consciousness in the Universe since the writer and actor ANTONIN ARTAUD (see encrypted link for ARTAUD op details) perished in the early forties, long before the cult was founded. They believe that human life is nothing but a simulation or game, and that HOWARD is on the verge of discovering this apparent illusion. When he does, they say, he will “tear open the veil” - presumably the fabric of reality or spacetime itself - and expose to all witnesses whatever the “true” reality is. This will be their psychedelic equivalent of an apocalypse in which the squares will lose and the circles will emerge triumphant. Agency rumors and tips have infoquarantined a yet unsubstantiated anonymous tip from an undisclosed location that the PALMERS have *teral*itres of LSD-25 cached somewhere in each of America’s major metropolitan cities. An indeterminate number of vats of pure LSD which they could never possibly consume on their own, boasting an average of

60-100 members per city, and considering that, while no consumable dose is fatal, an average dose is 100-150 *micrograms*. Intel reports interception of a PALMERS terrorist in SLC this January who was discovered tampering with a subterranean water main. Under rigorous duress, the renegade plumber revealed vague indications of a foolproof guerilla-style method of delivering large volumes of soluble bioterror agent into a metropolitan water supply using only about three thousand dollars in Canadian Tire money. (Bioterror agent and tunnel rat labor not included.)

Nod's Tibetan astrologers have confirmed the manifestation of a MESSIAH in Teedot in exactly three days. Intelligence has calculated anomalies in the subject's behavioral patterns over the last 14 days, and the PALMERS appear to be preparing for a massive religious event or festival. Two more reports, released on a need-to-know basis, substantiate a theory that subject HOWARD will be directly responsible for the **next** messiah incarnation as well.

*But that's such bullshit, Tritia winced sarcastically, the man is like forty years old. I know the type. There's no way in hell a Messiah would last that long without getting noticed and solved. Ah well. Recon is recon, and until I build a much less dodgy hypothesis, Howard is all I have to work with. Besides, a handwritten confession to successful self-evolution using LPMT is as good as a death warrant whether he's a real Messiah or not. Fuck, I just want to get it over with, make Nod smile, and retire.*

Tritia had originally rented the apartment directly above Howard's, impressioned a key to his apartment, and set up a surveillance extravaganza. But surveillance turned out to be un-fucking-**bear**able to review. Hours and hours on end of a man reading, sleeping, researching math on the internet, doing math problems on paper, writing; and all of the above, except stumbling around whacked out of his mind on hallucinogens. No useful audio capture. Nothing to go on but words written by people she didn't know.

The only interesting bit of data she found and scanned was an atrociously hand-scrawled journal entry in identical black book #143 on page 130; entitled "*I am NOT paranoid.*" She laughed. Howard's datasheet indicated otherwise. She whispered, "You're all that and a bag of schiz- ... But don't worry, Howard, in your particular case, ghost agents really *\*are\** watching you and looking through your stuff."

And this was the ultimate irony in Tritia's line of work. Most of her marks had pronounced paranoia in one form or another, but her intervention always justified it, no matter how stealthily and passively she worked. She actually was the Devil their imaginations would cook up. They teach first year Nod school fedayeens-in-training a little quantum theory for this one simple reason. *One cannot observe an event without influencing the natural course of that event.* Likewise, the spy influences the evidence she collects. But Tritia is an agent of Nod and Nod agents are not involved in espionage... While spies confirm and monitor known data, Nod agents *evoke* their evidence. Working algorithmically towards a desired political turning point, the result of which always profits an anonymous cluster of Carribean bank accounts who happen to issue very colorful paychecks with translucent images of flamingos and sunsets every six weeks.

She read something in Howard's datasheet which had somehow eluded her first skim-read. The word *agency*. The journal excerpts she had scanned... from those two hundred or so identical biomech-style PVC-bound handwritten journals... maybe she read it wrong, but now it was showing little signs that Howard might be unconsciously *aware* of the existence of her employers, and that he possibly even had a basic understanding of Nod's true agenda. The excerpt that had groped her scanalytical tit and caused her to bring it to the attention of Nod's escalation agents was practically carved into the pages with a splattery black ballpoint in shipwrecked madman hand...

...corporate class is sleeper consciousness caused by corporate immersion and unfulfilled routine-based lifestyle in captivity. Sleeper consciousness has little or no free will and behaves according to marketing algorithms and choices of arbitrary favorites among consumable objects and experiences. Sleeper consciousness defines itself by its attachments and desires. Sleepers must be kept asleep by use of existing consciousness modifiers in order to preserve governmental efficiency. (Free will is the enemy of all ruling entities, no matter what their rhetoric.)

I believe an agency exists to control cheaters at this game...

...occasional users of psychedelics; falun gong practitioners; neo-psytrancers; some of the internal martial artists; drug writers, artists and musicians; surrealists; and even most layman Palmers will never go on the nod. This is a cultural renaissance, and a little victimless vice in the privacy of your own consciousness is no longer considered cultural treason like it was before global economics showed its true colors and proved to everyone that all their freedom was being locked up safe, policed and inaccessible in the first multinational bank of profit. You can use these psychological, spiritual and chemical cracks, trainers and cheats in your flat with the privacy glass on, and you don't even have to deal with privatized security unless you're obnoxious about it. You can cheat recreationally, as long as you don't encourage too many others to use the cheats too... especially if you intend to teach others how to use these psychospiritual powertools properly. *Then* you're a threat. *Then* you're on the list that doesn't exist. You must not discuss your progress using cheats, or that information will be nixed by strategic ridicule and well-crafted viral invalidation memes. Those who make too much overt progress, and especially those who, in the awful loaded words of our anti-aware legal system, "successfully self-evolve," will invariably cross paths with the tactical cheat control prerogative I'm talking about. Whether you're a yogi, a shaman, a bodhisattva

or a psychonaut, you have to make all of your inner progress in secret... individualized evolution is treasonous in this society, and punishable by some invisible network of stoned assassins trying to slip shellfish toxin-dipped wires into your eye sockets while you have your first and last Octal-dimensional dream.

If I read the Tibetan Book of the Dead again, will I still have the skills to survive in the immediate hours of Bardo following my successful self-evolution, or will these invisible ninjas apply one of six million ways to prevent me from realizing unfiltered, objective reality? I must evolve... now.

She outright balked at this. How *the hell* could he know so much about Nod? Clearly, it was a paranoid schizophrenic guess, but how could a guy who never leaves his house or reads the news guess with such bloody accuracy? Had he possibly flown under internet carnivore radar, looked into the deaths of certain charismatic and awakened inner explorers, and wondered why so many of them died of rare organ diseases? Here he was - writing about reality as if it were a game, and as if she were some kind of cheat police to search and destroy overt rule benders. Well, the craziest thing is, his most far-reaching nutjob suspicions would still all work in their true context. Her "clients" **did** all seem to fall into the messiah complex category. Her fellow agents **did** sometimes refer to Job thirteen as "taking out Christ." She'd always done mostly contract hits on marks prominently involved with religion, drugs, cults or mysticism. But that's impossible, she argued with herself, *There's no way any biosystem could be entirely fooled by an infosystem... Is there?*

She wondered how well she could identify the virtuality of a dream while fully immersed.

After nearly a minute, her psychic defense mechanisms realized she couldn't handle the strain of sudden reality invalidation at that time, so they proceeded to distract the hell out of her by telling her to *encrypt the new scans to Nod's public key immediately, hijack some innocent website, stego it into the site's wallpaper, and await further instructions.*

Besides giving bliss a bad name, ignorance can sometimes be the only thing between you and a psychotic episode.

Since Howard never communicated with anyone but his neighbor, layer 1 surveillance was getting her nowhere. She had to do it alone. Multilayered surveillance would prove expensive and useless, and besides, knowledge that she was operating in Teedot at the moment was certainly a secret more important than the lives of four or five subcontracted pavement artists and D&D guys. She decided to just give up until she received further instructions following her recent reports. She changed directions and went for the third party approach. Check out the neighbor, "TALIA". See what turns up.

\* \* \*

Tritia found herself busy and silent in the shadows of Howard's flat that evening, packing up the matte black electronic Ninja-Tek platinum kit components, returning them to their form-fitting cradles of molded gray foam like omniscient robot eggs in slick black



impact-resistant pelican crating. She heard Howard stagger home; gurgling and fumbling with keys for at least three minutes while she went code yellow and hopped balconies.

She immediately bore witness to the most awe-inspiring, tattooed shaven-headed, well-built elven specimen she had ever, ever, **ever** had the privilege by which to be so erotically and helplessly transfixed. Talia O'Reilly. The *neighbor*. In nothing but a sports bra. Cocking her head to one side like a confused puppy, slackjawed, stomach full of deep fried butterfly monsters, Tritia realized she was hostage to lust at first sight. Emotions, hormones, endorphins and dopamine shipwrecked her reason, as usual. *Nod conditioning be damned*, she forgot all about the primary objectives of the job; focusing *entirely* on the hot new girl.

And so it goes; the next time Howard's neighbor left her apartment, it was seamlessly retrofitted with every piece of Ninja-Tek Tritia could requisition... the full Platinum kit *plus* queriable particles *and* the four NATO-violating expansion sets. Then it was **all** about sitting in her new apartment for hours and hours watching the Talia Show. In record time, she got to know Talia better than Talia knew herself. (When you know someone better than they know themselves, this usually means you're dangerously in stalker-love.) She grew obsessed. Fantasies would run wild through her imagination while she watched the Talia Show. Scenarios where they would meet under the most bizarre circumstances imaginable... everything from making out behind the curry baskets in Turkish spice markets to playing trust games on the decks of surfaced non-government Seawolf-class submarines.

Her human nature pushed and *kept pushing* the boundaries of her curiosity and bravado until, one fateful night, the Talia Show felt altogether too distant and impersonal.

Too much like reality television. She needed to feel *closer*. She needed her ego to be present. She needed to be *all the way live on the set* of the Talia Show.

Half a bottle of Ricard later, Tritia was reminding herself *I'm a bloody stalker* from the inside of Talia O'Reilly's closet. *Holy shit, girl, what the fuck is your problem? If you found a guy in your closet like this, you'd give him a septum lobotomy. Surveillance is one thing, but admit it, this ain't about surveillance, innit?*

But, despite the voices in her head, there she sat, feeling like a guilt-ridden freak, inhaling all the enticing olfactory evidence Talia's laundry had to offer. Strange new club drugs, sweat, burger grease, cheap Chinese-style cherry incense, marker, coffee, and of course, *mmmmmmmpussy*.

On that note, the apartment door unlocked, and the Talia Show was *on*, this time before a live studio audience. But tonight, this seemed to be one of those depressing, dramatic episodes that occur when the usual writers go on strike and jobless graduates end up writing meaningful content. Talia was very drunk and crying violently. Tritia's heart raised a tender fist against this. She couldn't deal with watching girls in any kind of emotional pain. It was a real soft spot, right at her center, that Nod had never managed to harden.

The cocktail jerk in Talia's brain was having what's referred to in synaptic bartender slang as "a real bad fucking trainwreck of a night." Tritia had seen the same erratic performance just two nights ago, but she'd dismissed it as a one-time thing. This time it was more serious. This girl was looking rough.

Since Talia had flooded her system with happychems two nights earlier, the jerk in her head was running flat out of serotonin and dopamine precursors. Thus, he was

forced to concoct all kinds of terrible cocktails in botched attempts to work without the key ingredients that kept Talia happy and sane. She was acutely depressed to begin with; naturally serotonin-impaired; which was the main reason she was so attracted to happychems in the first place. On top of that, Talia had been slamming liquor like a thug, walking around alone, and entertaining her darkest thoughts all evening. With practically nothing but internal and external depressants to work with, the bartender in her head gave up on trying to make happy cocktails. He'd cut her off and quit.

As a result, Talia was puffy, pink, crying, and physically weak from it. The chemicals in her brain were forcing her under duress to repeat mantras like *Nobody loves you, you useless fucking orphan*, and then a complex cluster of chemical reactions posing as her soul would reply: *You're absolutely right*. A better mantra might have been something like "*I am nothing but aware*," but such wisdom cannot usually survive the hostile environment of a suicidal mind long enough to penetrate the cynicism-brain barrier.

Staggering into her bedroom, Talia clumsily grabbed a corner of her single futon and lifted it. She tried to pull the long metal box out from underneath, forgetting about holding up the end of the futon. Suddenly, she got cracked in the cheekbone and shoulder with a heavy wooden corner, and totally lost it. *One of those days when everything fucks up and everything you do makes it fuck up worse...* Frustrated, and now letting out cathartic screams and gnawing on her forearm to distract her intellect with lower-level signals, Talia eventually coerced the box to come out and relinquish its morbid equipment.

Tritia watched this dramatic live episode of the Talia Show through the narrow

horizontal slats as the show's unwitting star emerged from her bedroom carrying a small, expensive bottle of port; a bulbous and shiny metallic goblet; a razor-sharp tanto; a rolled-up high-absorbency straw tatami mat; and a small angry black rubber-bound notebook with a precision dental instrument of a pen chained to it like specialized ammunition, presumably to arm an angst-based weapon of mass destruction, pen-beats-sword style.

First unrolling the mat in the center of the living room and then placing the other items ritualistically around it, Talia finally staggered over to her silver stereo and put on the most soulwrenching album she could find.

Falling to her scarred-up tomboy knees on the cold tatami mat, sobbing, she poured herself a gobletful of tawny port and slammed it like a mere shooter. From the closet, Tritia couldn't hear most of her utterances, other than *useless ... pathetic ... weak ... orphan ... failure ... no good ...* Irritant vines of sympathy wrapped themselves tightly around Tritia's heart. She hated to see shit like this; people hating themselves...

Alternating between slamming shiny goblets of port and madly scribbling chickenscratch poetry in her angry black rubber book, Talia noticed she was crying all over the pages and smearing the squid ink. The mountain of tension within her collapses; disastrous and unreasonable. Furious serial tantrums crash through Talia like tsunamis with agendas. She tears her journal asunder and hurls its remains across the room; right into the closet door behind which Tritia bears silent and unflinching witness.

She muses, *Now this here is one crazy episode.*

Polishing off the bottle of port in one final, stoic gulp, Talia undhooks the topmost six buttons of her shirt, leaving it tucked in at the waist, and folds the sleeves beneath her

knees.

And **now** Tritia panics. *Holy fuck ... Seppuku?! She's gonna comit seppuku?!*

*Wait...*

Talia unsheathes the tanto and visibly embraces nihilism. Just as that famous disconnected expression glazes her face; just as her arm's slow-twitch muscles calculate the necessary in-bent puncturing leverage; just as the tip of her tempered steel breaks the bare skin of her lower midsection,

Tritia erupts from the closet freestyle and tackles her, grabbing her weapon hand firmly by the wrist and applying leverage. She scolds Talia without even thinking, mid-tackle; "What the fuck are you trying to do to yourself?!!"

Now, tackling the most beautiful girl she's ever seen, who happens to be topless at the time, isn't exactly the *worst* experience Tritia's ever had, but even while incoherently drunk and staggering, this girl can seriously fight. From suicide to self-preservation in 0.6 seconds flat, she offers no resistance whatsoever to Tritia's attack, gently allowing her body to buckle backwards and shoving Tritia in the same direction she was already hurtling... facefirst into the TV. The flatscreen cracks and the optical vacuum goes brightly **POP**, yet she still manages to retain control of Talia's wrist for the moment. Ignoring all the new bits of plastic and metal in her face, she breathes out and recenters her awareness.

Using small circle theory and simply unrolling her wrist out of the dreadlocked girl's grasp, Talia jumps to her feet and backs away aghast. Summoning an overdriven and squelched blast of emotional audio-weaponry from the depths of her diaphragm, she screams the words, "Who the fuck are you?!!!" into the face of her assailant. She wonders:

*Where's my sword? Oh shit! I left it at the club!* Half-naked self-defense in the context of interrupted ritual self-disembowelment is foreign emotional territory for Talia. She momentarily considers just letting her assailant kill her.

But dread-girl stands up and tries to plead with her, "I'm not trying to hurt you!"

*Sure you're not.* Enough alcohol and you think in pure beast. And right now, Talia's beast insists: *You have a tanto in your hand, use it, use it, use it!*

Tritia says, "Look, just drop the knife and will talk, OK? Nobody has to get hurt here."

*Talk. Yeah. Sure thing. Just lemme do this one thing first...* Without any telegraphed warning, Talia throws five blurry stabs and slashes in the time it would have taken Tritia to throw two. During slash number five, Tritia grabs the armed wrist again and rapidly knuckle-punches the center of the forearm; overstimulating the hell out of Talia's radial nerve. Her hand goes numb and releases the knife. She winces, watches the knife float downwards as her balance suddenly fails her. Reflexively, she clutches at a handful of rubbery throat-viscera on her way down.

The back of Talia's head causes an unreasonable dent in her hardwood flooring as she spontaneously blurts out *gaaugfhk!* in winded shock. Dizzy, disoriented, and now with a very impressive grip sure to crush her opponent's breathing apparatus in no time. *Hey, I'm pretty damn good when I'm this drunk. Listen to those choking noises... she is OUT.*

Ignoring the rude unpleasantness of a collapsed trachea, Tritia spies a momentary twinge of overconfidence in her throttler's gorgeous eyes. She sighs inside, and, planting both of her thumbs on the foreknuckles of the offending hand, she twists Talia's grip off

her neck and right into a textbook-perfect reverse wristlock. *Solid.*

Like water, Talia just diverolls into the natural kinesic trajectory of the wristlock, rendering it useless. She remains prone on the floor in a modified ground defense position; still in control of the arm. She kicks out and wraps both legs around Tritia's struggling body; forcefully yanking the trapped arm out and levered across her thigh at the elbow in a Brazilian jujitsu-style armbar.

Tritia spasms as she feels her right arm about to snap backwards at the elbow. Sensing imminent trauma, the soft tissue issues rapid, panicked and screaming chemical action potentials up the back of her arm and neck, where they urgently charge the ramparts of the blood-brain barrier, burst into the foyer of the quick-decision-making apparatus and demand an immediate reaction.

What comes to Tritia's rescue is an internally synthesized designer neurochemical called Nodrenaline HCl. Nodrenaline is loosely based on plain old norepinephrine, but it is superior in many ways, and available exclusively to Nod agents. Where adrenaline panics you, Nodrenaline calms you and vastly enhances your tactical rationale. As modded and retrained areas of your brain synthesize and distribute this patented product, time slows to a crawl around you; providing you with calm, precious seconds in which to think about saving your ass... *Think. Think! Okay, This girl has been classically trained; in a dojo. All traditional schools condition their students to immediately stop their technique on a certain command or signal. The more you train, the more you are conditioned to respond to that stimulus. Japanese grappling arts all use the "tapping out" signal to end a submission or choking technique.* Just as the last overture of Talia's suicide album falls eerily silent, Tritia thwacks her own thigh with five sharp, staccato

taps.

Talia goes blank and immediately releases the armbar. She doesn't even realize why for a confusing few seconds. They both carefully rise to their feet. Absently, Talia puts her arms back in her sleeves and hikes them briskly up to the elbows. The two girls eye each other cautiously, unsure what happens next.

Wanting more than anything to establish peace and understanding, Tritia is the first to break the silence. "Look, I'm not trying to hurt-"

Using Tritia's shift in concentration from physical to verbal awareness as a tactical advantage, Talia immediately attacks her eyes. Tritia slips underneath the attack, crosses her arms and grabs two handfuls of shirt. She quickly maneuvers her right elbow over Talia's head, pulls forward and torques. Collar strangulation number eight.

Sanguinius. She pulls Talia backwards and off-balance to reduce the possibility of counterattack; forcing her to focus on her loss of equilibrium. Talia immediately realizes she's fucked and gives up; goes limp. Tritia brings her gently backwards to the floor. She looks into the girl's defeated eyes and feels something she has never before felt in combat: *emotional*. Unable to resist, she leans in, releases the choke, and kisses Talia full on the mouth, tasting tawny port and the submissiveness of defeat on her beautiful, wet lips. A rush of passion-induced adrenaline...

*Whoa. What the fuck is going on here?*

Tritia looked down and met Talia's eyes. She looked flushed and confused... an innocent look about her that was, rather erotically, reminding Tritia of a hungry kitten. It felt very strange and very wrong, considering the circumstances of their first meeting. But the indulged temptation, irresistible as gravity itself, had short-circuited Tritia's



libidinal awareness with succulent rushes of dirty, illicit stimulus.

She struggled for words capable of explaining her actions. All that came out was, "Hi. I'm Tritia."

Talia's eyes widened and her pupils dilated. She asked, "Are-are you going to kill me?"

She smiled. "Of course not. I just saved your life, remember?"

*Oh yeah ...* Talia was lost. Aware of her own intoxication, she stuck to basics. "So ... um, what do you want?" Her voice rasped on the word *want*, warming Tritia's groin, all tinglish and lonely at the sultry timbre of that wetly mouthed word *want*.

Tritia felt her face flush hot red; her heart pounding out passionately against the confines of her sternum. She took a deep, nervous breath, grinned, and boldly replied with every erg of counterfeit confidence she could conjure,

"You."

Lost at sea in the surreal novelty of the moment, Talia hesitated, tried to understand, and pretty much failed. She answered, nonchalantly, "Oh." *Well*, she pondered, *I'd be gutted and bloodless on my floor by now. What could be worse than that? And I mean damn, this girl's pretty fucking hardcore...* She added, "Okay," craning her neck up to meet Tritia's fat and trembling lips. She took Tritia's bottom lip gently between her teeth and suckled it innocently like a methcandy. Tritia released her nervous breath in stuttered bursts. Neither of them could believe what was happening ... it was ethereal as a consensual wet dream to them both.

First, the mutually intoxicated panty removal negotiation. Tickling. Misdirection. Slow, hot exhales into hypersensitive ears. Goosebumps and headrush.

Next, Tritia tasting every sweatsalted inch of Talia's quivering body; snaking her tongue up her freckled thighs; wetly tracing the sacred Sanskrit tattoos snaked in rich brown bands around her ticklish and tinglish zones like a two-dimensional Tibetan S&M harness. Then, drunk on the pheremone-laced aroma of each others' aroused and slippery bodies intermingling, the two girls flipped and locked themselves into a position affording them both maximum carnal voracity. Alternating between the soft passive tongue and the pointy prehensile tongue; circling, lapping, squashing, suckling, buzzsawing, figure-eighting, interrogating and spelling out dirty words on her clit; rhythmically curling two fingers gently jammed in, up and around; two of them lost completely and ecstatically in the experience; first the burst of slightly sharper flavors, then the contractions, then, *then... then...*

Two hours, twelve flavors and sixty-two unique erotic sensations later, Talia was immersed in a drunken postorgasmic slumber while self-destruct commands were quietly issued to all of her invisible digital witnesses.

Tritia was doing the one thing she did best: befriending invisibility; leaving no residual presence.

## Chapter Sixteen

Hung over, itchy, bruised and wondering *what the fuck happened last night*, Talia just really needed to swallow a handful of corrective medicine and relax. B12s, panadol, 5-HTP, St. John's wort, cannabis, kava, and a small, expensive pinch of methoxydramadol, which, for the two hours immediately following her railing the sour orange powder, would make her feel as if she were blissfully acting out a saccharine, slow-motion, soft-lit, musically remastered sentimental bioretrospective of her own life.

She faded in some Balinese triphop and ran an all-hot bath, pouring a fine stream of magnolia oil into the water as it coursed out of the foggy steel spigot. Staggering out into the living room, she surveyed the wreckage of her apartment between wincing migraine throbs. Her seppuku kit was out, her journal torn apart and scattered, her TV was face down on the floor amid bloodstained plastic and silicone shrapnel. These mysterious and familiar images triggered momentary memories of the preceding evening: Hallucinations of a dread-headed redhead coming out of the closet. *Seppuku!* Then fighting, and *oh fuck I left my sword at the club, SHIT! ...fighting, and... I think I got knocked out...* her fall into unconsciousness had been sweetly cushioned by lurid dreams of the ruffneck girl in the closet... *was I dreaming? Was she possibly a subconscious portrait of who I wish I was?* Her toxic dehydrated migraine interrupted her train of thought with sharp, pulsing pain.

Whatever happened, she was still breathing, and now she needed to forget about last night's binge, forget about her sword, forget about Trin and forget about his stupid Muramasa before the stress of it all blew her head open.

*Methoxydramadol to the rescue!* \*snort\* \*snort\* \*snort\* She made a flippant *fadeout* gesture at the stereo and the Balinese triphop retreated into beatlessness.

Her azure bathroom was filling with a heavy and relaxing floral brume. She looked up too slowly, meeting her own goofy gaze in the hazy reflection. She sighed and proceeded to slowly, blissfully light candles in the soap dish, on the back of the strange little toilet, along the bathtub's ledge, and in front of the mirror. A sun-warm orange relaxation traveled along her chakras and through her body faster and smoother than morphine. Aromatic steam soothed her mind; slowing it down, killing all the frustrated chatter. She pulled off her stealth hoodie, took off her ROAM tag necklace and unzipped her sports bra, dropping them all to the floor. She undid her urban combat pants and pushed them off her hips with the undies and socks all in one fluid motion, climbed into her fragrant watery inferno, and slowly sank in, taking its lush magnolia scent deep into her lungs. Her skin burned, but it was a really, **really** good burn. She absently craned her neck to the left and blew hard on the wet tile, watching with unjaded amazement as the water droplets exploded exactly the same way fireworks always do. She laid back and let her ears fill with water so she couldn't hear the world. She listened to her breathing and her heartbeat, amplified by the water and its silence, and went to a place where her heartbeat and her natural breathing rhythms were all that existed. She cleared her mind by comparing the two rhythms. Her heartbeat just happened naturally, and she couldn't control it... much. It just *was*, and it was doing exactly what it was meant to do with no mental interference or complication. Breathing happened naturally, but as soon as she thought about it, she would start controlling it; trying to breathe, and breathing in a naturally awkward rhythm. She paid attention to her heart, and her breathing would

return to a natural rhythm. After a few moments, she got the hang of paying attention to her breathing without controlling it. *Passive attentiveness*. And at this point, all the stress and worry was gone. She was absolutely content in doing what she was doing at the moment. *Blissful non-thinking. Sitting with silence; the emptiness out of which all sound is born.*

Like the sound of pounding at her door.

By the time Talia rejoined consensus reality, her bathwater was cooler than room temperature and most of the stubbier candles had burned out. She pulled the plug and blissfully rose out of the water, wrapping herself in a thick fuzzy red towel. She blew out the rest of the candles and answered the door wet. There was no one there.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Tritia was directly above her ogling an object which she considered to be the ultimate token of her guerilla approach to romantic love (and / or apology) in her naked lap; a white gelpen in her hand. Her heart pounded and fluttered and flooded with hot buttered adrenaline. *Adrenaline without danger*, she thought, *imagine that*. She was brand new to the secret admirer vibe, and she was really starting to get into its flow. Tritia took romance seriously. She had actually tried to explain it to Trin, but in her wild enthusiasm and blarney glibness, her Vietnamese came out pretty much the same way he sounded in English.

"See, Trin, true romance is sort of like performance art. First of all, forget all that Hollywood shit. All that Hollywood shit is the same old five or six gestures; canonized into two-dimensional cliché oblivion. It's just like spirituality... if you expect to get by just doing nothing but imitating the enlightened, you'll never learn or unlearn anything. See, Trin, the art of romance is to orchestrate as unique and enjoyable as possible a one-time mutual experience, and to balance running it smoothly with actually enjoying it. Now the way I see shit, true romantics require all the same skills as a criminal mastermind; infiltration, deception, forgery, uh, inside contacts in multiple service industries, disguise, stealth, um, liquid resources, yeah ,and most importantly, mushin wits. You can bite Joe Denominator's style and do all that stupid roses, cards and jewelry bullshit - so culturally canonized they each have their own franchised retail stores. **Or...** you can suck it up and spend the five months figuring out how you, a priest and two tactical freelancers can smuggle a sleeping girl in a wedding dress into the Romanesque Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, secure the perimeter, rest her gently down on the golden altar without waking her, get your wedding on, deploy lookalike decoys in opposite directions and escape to Florence incognito; damn all conventional methods to hell, you know what I'm saying?"

What Trin made out: "One's ancestors must have fresh sparkling romance for refreshing longevity. Might Joe Demonic hater practise correct hygiene in the autumn inversion method?" He just nodded and grinned. It didn't matter what she was saying, he could tell it was irrelevant to him. Guiltless, he carefully passed Tritia a package over the counter, in exchange for a particularly rare and dishonorable barter on her part.

She, on the other hand, felt quite a bit of guilt over hawking still-classified Nod

equipment on the black market. One hundred milligrams of finely powdered, indole-scented, amber-tinted CNS toxin with an oral LD50 of only eight micrograms per human kilogram and inbuilt enzymatic self-erasure. Also known as Resolution #34, it was an item assumed *exclusively* available to Hashisheen. Tritia tried not to think about the repercussions, which turned out to be really easy. Nod, after all, had taught her how.

When she'd gone in under the riotshield to deal at 6am, Trin's outer storefront was deserted. On the way out, though, she'd found herself staring into the rabid faces of two dozen hardcore Latino Crew cholos blasting angry Spanish desperado guitar music on their stereos, bouncing their cars menacingly, brandishing sun-catching straight razors, machetes, and punch knives. She'd instinctively played up a sexy act so they wouldn't pay much attention to her *other* than sexual attention. Stray comments and whistles, but no real hostility. She had quickly removed herself from that situation, thinking: *very, very bad scene about to happen...*

\* \* \*

Talia woke up at noon to the irritating sound of her VOIP-phone. Half-awake, she managed to grope the receiver and answer it.

"Hello?" She had to clear her throat and manually unstick her left eyelid.

"Yo Talia, I got the shit."

"Oh. Carne. Are you OK? You sound like you just ran a marathon."

"Yeah, well, I'm OK now. So when you wanna do this?"

Talia's brain was still clouded by hangover and the tail end of the methoxy. "Um,

uh... fuck it, better make it tonight. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, sure, that's perfect. Where?"

"Death Rattle. Eleven pee-em."

"Ah shit. OK, if I have to. I'll bring a big fucking crucifix and some wooden stakes..."

"Come on. I'm in a deathgoth mood."

"...with their big fucking medieval swords and their drinks that look like blood and give them cancer. Those freaks are scarier than real vampires, know what I'm saying?"

She unwittingly tried to infect Carne with drug war propaganda meme viruses by telephone, "It's the pigs you should be worrying about. You get caught dealing that shit, Carne... gas chamber time. The harshest hotbox of your life. I heard they're considering it treason now..."

Like Howard, Carne was also ideologically self-immunized. "It's cool. I got me some backup the pigs can't fuck with. Professional help, knaamean? Anyway, thanks for the business, beautiful. I owe you, you know?"

"Can't argue with that. See you at eleven."

"Aiight."

She almost put down the receiver, then quickly put it back up to her mouth. "Hey, Carne!"

"Yeah, 'sup?"

"Bring garlic."

She smiled as she hung up the phone and shuffled into the kitchen. The coffee



pot was one-quarter full, and she just added more water to this without dumping it. She poured the gritty, light brown liquid into the top of the coffeemaker. The basket was broken, and she had duct-taped a makeshift filter assembly in its place, consisting of a styrenoform Mongolfood container and a filter made of a pair of her old nylons – she'd cut the feet off, doubled them up, filled them with grounds. and twist-tied them. It worked great.

All she had left in her fridge was a taco kit, two eggs, and a single slice of processed cheese with hardened orange corners. She crushed up a couple of taco shells, scrambled the eggs with the taco shell bits, some meat seasoning and some salsa, and then mixed in torn strips of processed cheese.

It was delicious. She ate standing up, right out of the nasty cast iron frying pan, and listened to the bowling alley noises coming from the coffeemaker. She looked around at her apartment, just now realizing how dire and ghetto it really looked. With the money she had saved up, she could probably afford to buy luxurious appliances, furniture, curtains, clothing, and even food. *Or*, she could own an authentic Muramasa, and continue going to parties, shows, raves and urban tribal rituals every other weekend. *The soul is eternal, the body temporary. Therefore, the soul deserves a better house than the body. And, (according to Talia's often regurgitated views on warrior spirituality,) a Muramasa is the best house any soul could ever dream of. In a hundred years, everyone I have ever met will be dead, but there I'll be, straight pimping it in the afterlife, thinking damn am I ever glad I got up in that muh-fuh-Mu-ra-ma-saaaaaaaaa ...*

There was another knock at her door. She looked through the peephole, but she saw no one. She opened the door and looked down the hall. There was a little smily

Lebanese pizza guy waiting for the elevator. She called out to him,

"Did you just knock on my door?"

He just smiled a weird uncomfortable smile at her, fixed his underwear and hurried into the elevator. Talia shrugged and closed the door. For a split second, she thought she saw movement on her balcony with her peripheral vision, but when her eyes refocused, she figured it was probably just her northern lights #5 plant blowing in the wind.

*Shit*, she thought, *I fed it way too much fertilizer... the leaves are burning at the edges...* She looked out at the spectre CN Tower, wondering, as always, what it would look like if it collapsed, but right then, something both alien and familiar caught her eye. When she noticed the giant gift-wrapped box sitting *right near her* on the futon couch, her heart choked, and for a second, she had zero faith in the reliable consistency of reality. *Am I dreaming?* She scrutinized the gift for artificial repetitions in texture. Matte black paper with shiny black dragons and grey curly ribbons. Loud, crinkly giftwrap. It took up the whole couch. It even felt real as she picked it up. *What the f- ...?* She cautiously unwrapped it, revealing a long cherry wood box she now *definitely* recognized.

Talia was almost sure she was dreaming, but everything seemed too real, too consistent to be a dream. Somehow, she could feel the difference. She undid the latches and, trembling, opened the box.

At the precise moment when the first candlelight photon reflected off the disinterred blade and tickled the back of Talia's optic nerve, her soul immediately convulsed with spiritual orgasm. It was the Muramasa. This time, with a handmade red and black lacquered scabbard and a full set of furniture. The theme was cranes and

bamboo; the tsuba alone probably worth about six thousand.

And there was more. A black envelope was neatly tucked into the certificate holder. A white rose was bound to the scabbard by a pair of little white cotton undies with a little pink heart print that she also definitely now recognized... *The Dreadhead... she was... real?!* She couldn't believe any of this. Inside the envelope was white gelpen on black card stock. *Weird, weird handwriting*, she thought...

*Talia,*

I just wanted to say that no one has ever touched me the way you did. You're amazing.

I'm going away in a few days. I don't really have a choice... If I ever even had a choice, I made it a long time ago. At this point, I don't yet know where I'll end up, but I know for sure that once I've left, we'll never get to see each other again. One way ticket, like.

I'm sorry I just disappeared. That's what I do.

I know this must be weird and confusing – it is for me, so before I disappear forever, I just wanted to let you know that there will always be someone on Earth who thinks about you, and who cares about you, and who loves you.

*Tritia.*

Talia felt warm, weird and weak. She let out a deep sigh and placed the card, the rose and the undies on her personal altar. She lit some sandalwood incense and bowed deeply to the altar, then, sinking down into her futon, she held the Muramasa in proud, austere silence until even the sun shrank and cowered.

Clothing. Tonight, colourful and clubby would definitely never do. First of all, she was going to a deathgoth club. Bright, loud clothes didn't go over well with the vampire crowd. Second, she had a *motherfucking Mu-ra-ma-sa* to strap to her left hip, and she would need a style that could keep up with its awesome aura of bad ass power. She decided to put on some Yakuzacore and get dressed. Yakuzacore is like Japanese gabber, with intensive sampling from Samurai and ninja films. They often use kung fu sound effects as primary percussion. It makes the adrenaline squirt alright.

Red leather bra. Black leather pants. Black see-through fishnet shirt. Black knit kevlar dueling gloves from thumbs to elbows. Thick black eyeliner on the lower lids, accented by tiny stick-on jewels like sexy tears. Silvery white lip frost. Muramasa on a double leather frogstrap. *Hell yeah*. But most important of all, her fourteen-hole red & black steel cap nPs warrior caste boots...

Aside from the various martial arts clans like the Dark Shaolin and the 47 Ronin, Teedot has a warrior caste; independent of any clans or gangs, to which anyone who wants to belong, and is capable, can. The caste's trademark is a pair of fourteen-hole nPs red steel capped boots. Anyone who wears these boots in public is assumed to be a part of this warrior caste. Individuals new to Teedot, or just generally naïve, are usually warned by Teedot's shopkeepers not to buy that particular make and model of boot unless they

fully understand what openly wearing the boots means to the violent element of Teedot's asphalt.

The Scots have this time-honored tradition that any man wearing a kilt can confront any other man wearing a kilt and forcibly check to make sure he's not wearing anything underneath. If he is, the underwear is removed and the man usually gets quite the bitchslap. Wearing red nPs shitkickers is a similar tradition. Anyone can wear them in the street, but that means anyone else in their vicinity who happens to be wearing the red boots is absolutely justified in beating the unwitting new wearers down hard whenever and wherever they're spotted. This is a Darwinistic process; if you can take the beatings, or defend yourself, or hand out some beat downs of your own in kind, then you can continue to wear the boots with pride. This marks you to everyone else in the city as a bad ass mofo who is not, under any circumstances, to be fucked with. If you can't deal with the beat downs that the caste has to offer, then you'll end up crippled or dead, or spending most of your time healing, so you won't get much of a chance to wear those bad red rudebwoys out in public.

Talia's ego was a chemical fire. A mad-hot, mysterious ninja grrl loved her, she was armed with one of history's finest blades, and she was dressed to kill. Somewhere deep inside her was still a confused little girl that wanted only to cry into her mother's big itchy stinky wool sweater, but tonight that little girl was getting a 25-screw-riveted nPs sole to the face if the whiny domesticated little priss dared poke her head out of her cage.

The Yakuzacore and the Ethiopian coffee were antagonizing one another - building psychotic energy in Talia's nervous system. She played a little wallpoker, piercing the tiny hearts of kings and queens with greasy steak knives from several meters

away. She threw a 4-J-J-Q-K; flush. She pondered the legal gravity of tonight's deal. If something went wrong, she and Howard could really get fucked in the ass. As if the Muramasa itself resonated a confident chord within her, she relaxed and outright realized that whatever came at her tonight was going to get itself cleaved in bloody fucking twain.

\* \* \*

Next door, Howard was coming down from his fifth successful attack dose of fantasy, trying hard to transcribe his experiences, but losing most of the meaning as his consciousness rapidly lost bandwidth. There were deep black anterograde holes in his memory of the last several hours. Nevertheless, coming down was always nice... chilling in the presence of a huge luminous chrysanthemum, his body fully relaxed, his imagination overstimulated, his belief systems all shattered by new realizations... and always noticing a pronouncedly clearer sensory manifestation of the Other Place... more lucid than ever in all of its overlapping cryptomechanical splendor. The really cool thing was, after every attack dose, the next surface turned out easier to solve than he'd expected. He regretted returning the empty cube to Talia... to retain in his private collection the ingenious artifact that once unlocked his consciousness. *Damn*. He sat hunched like a mad poet over book #262, trying desperately to turn jewels into mere word sequences.

If you can completely visualize an event in the mind  
with all of your senses, and with unshakable faith, in a

completely lucid way, but withOUT expressing any desire, need, want, longing, craving, etc whatsoever for the event to happen, you will almost certainly create that reality. Never attach to an unmanifested result – just feel that it will ultimately manifest. The key to reality creation is willing without wanting. Wanting is a powerful “negatively charged” force which pushes away desired events and realities by the energetic assertion of an absence. Desire expresses a LACK OF - a vacuum - an absolute negative. A screaming assertion to the universe that the definition of YOU is “that which does not have  $x$ .” And therefore, when you actively desire, you *will* the idea of "not-have." You must disconnect all desire for results in order to create the conditions for manifestation to work properly. To use a neurobiology metaphor, think of yourself as blocking all of your positive event neuroreceptor sites with a bunch of inert molecular "I need this receptor filled" plugs. The waters of the mind must be calm, not turbulent, for maximum effectiveness...

Everything of which you are conscious is you. "You" are not a hard, defined boundary. When you share the same space with another person and you are therefore both conscious of another consciousness, do not believe

that "you become them and they become you." What really happens is, your \*conscious impression\* of them immediately integrates into you, and you have the same effect on them. In this respect, impressions really are everything, (empirically speaking.)...

Whatever ideas you retain prominently in your consciousness generate the flavor of you and your reality. Hold one particular thought in the forefront of your consciousness, and the you-reality continuum will manifest it to a degree relative to the intensity of the thought and the length of time the idea is held alone in consciousness....

Howard filled two 160-page journals with metaphysical ranting that morning.



## **Chapter Seventeen**

A secret communiqué from TAZA Other Place spiritual leaders to the Teedot chapter of the Palmers of Light; intercepted yesterday by a syndicate of co-operative cross-domestic military signals interception and patterns analysis specialists, who, for posterity's sake we shall name "Lenore":

**Greed must never be allowed to interfere with the free flow of information.**

**Information must not be traded for profit.**

**True subversives will attempt to liberate all commodified, restricted and classified information, and make it immediately, globally and permanently available to everyone on the wire; indefinitely. They will force liberated information upon both the censor and the "protected" ; upon both the info-monopolists and the info-starved simultaneously.**

**True subversives are independent intelligence operatives; seeking the most heavily commodified secrets and deflating their value with the sabotage of permanent and widespread exposure.**

**In that context, here is a secret:**

***THIS IS NOT DETERMINISM.***

***Deterministic systems do not change in complexity.***

***The time has finally arrived***

***To peel away the lids from greyfaced eyes!***

***Praise Howard!***

In response to this interception, which is considered real, an emergency response team has been deployed. All locals cells are now active. Consider all Palmers of Light and all Other Place cult member and leaders as hostile, armed terrorists. Constitutional protection, including PALMERS v. HENDRICKSON, is immediately nullified. Extinguish at will.

\* \* \*

When Carne phoned Talia and told her “*I got me some backup the pigs can’t fuck with,*” what he meant was: the moment he had Trin's pill back in his hands, he’d pull all the highest strings he could reach to get in touch with a real live Nod operative who’d be willing to "supervise" his Fantasy deal.

Earlier that day, he’d been scared. Shitless. By a girl. The permafrosty foundations of his thugdom were cracked and shaken right there in public - right in front of Talia’s apartment - by some foxy dreadlocked chica who obviously knew every trick

of her trade, plus three variations. Under some ludicrous new law that placed even *conspiracy* to traffic Fantasy under its very own controlled substance schedule, creatively knighted “Schedule A” by some invisible, antidemocratic Them; that *one* pill would now merit the very same legally punitive vengeance as treason: high profile character-assassination in the major media, followed by a nauseating 24-hour death in a slowgaschamber on national television in front of a live studio audience and sponsored by your friendly corporate slavemasters. So Carne just wasn't going to get caught. Period. And this mysterious girl was his new saviour. She fed him some inside advice... the website, login and password of a golden ghetto thug market ... where he incredulously found *exactly* what he was looking for. He made some emails, satphone calls, and a few obnoxious off-topic posts about dolphin sex, and a mere three hours later, there he stood on Blure eating Uzbekistani vendordogs with Nyn, who would have been tapped about an hour and a half earlier, right there in Teedot, by the hand of Nod itself. *Almost too good to be true.*

Nyn was trying to maintain a doleful balance between professional politeness and attempting to figure out how the mission Carne had just explained to him was important enough to require his expertise.

“So let me repeat what you just said back to you, in my own words, so that I can be sure I understand the situation correctly.” Nyn sounded like bad educational film narrative whenever he took on a sarcastic tone. “You feel that it is of utmost importance that I go with you to meet this gentleman, uh,”

“Howard” Carne smiled.

Nyn checked a self-reflection in Carne's teeth and preened his eyebrow. He

smelled clean from a distance, and he knew it. “Right, Howard, who you feel poses such a significant threat to a *player* like yourself that your life depends on the full services of a professional organization, that is, if there were such an organization, and I promise you, Carne, there isn’t...”

“Yeah, the website said you’d say that... Hey, ese, you sound like the museum or some shit.”

“...and these services are expected to be rendered... **free of charge!**” He raised his voice with wild mock enthusiasm and mimed sarcastic air-magic.

Carne fronted. “Man, fuck bling, yo, I got juice, esé, you know what I’m sayin? Bling is no-thing. We could go get some bling right now if that’s all you want, G.” He madly piled on the free condiments, apparently not even looking at whatever it was he was shoveling atop his sausage. (A slight preference for chunky yellow stuff, perhaps.)

“Okay wait, so, this is a ‘personal favor’ to you, even though I don’t know you, I’ve never heard of you, and you don’t appear to have the slightest influence over anything in a thousand-kilometre radius. *This is bullshit. Why the fuck would Nod hook me up with this JOKE?* Oh, right, and you need me to protect you while you sell this man Howard...” he paused slightly to observe Carne’s reaction, body language and eye direction, “a key of hash or something.”

Carne’s voice, face and hands proved deception by four different positive indicators. “Yeah.”

Nyn chuckled. “Sure. And whereas my usual salary and equipment allowance for a small time deal like this tends to work out to around, uh, **twenty thousand** or so...”

“Gotta reprazent, g!” A riotous little flash of Latino gang signs. The vendor

slowed his movements and eyed him cautiously.

“So why not just bring five or six of your homeboys to back you up instead of me?”

Carne’s deception indicators once again went apeshit. “Well, you know, uh, that shit would like, scare him away and shit? And besides, that shit would look like a *deal*, yo, know what I’m saying? Now, just me and you, that’s not *superstitious* like six Gs in bandanas, right?”

“Suspicious. Sure. Um, speaking of which, Carne, is there anything I should know about this man ‘Howard?’ I mean, Carne, I’m known by reputation alone for terminating teams of Samurai class corporate security without even resorting to chemicals. I take out entire terrorist cells. I could kill you and all your homeboys with this chair right here.”

Carne and the vendor both utterly failed casual attempts to avoid stiffening up and looking directly at the chair. What a *pussy*, Nyn mused. “So what’s the deal?” he pressed, “Is Howard government or something? What does he want with *your* drugs? And how did you find me anyway?”

Carne felt himself pressurize, approaching the verge of fierce defensiveness. “Yo, look, I don’t know shit about shit, you know?” He puffed out his chest and failed to stare Nyn down.

Nyn just calmly ate his whistle dog with all the anal-retentive precision of a cultured mid-40s gay man in an expensive suit. “Yes, Carne, I realize that.” Nary a crumb nor a sesame seed from his wienerkaiser hit the pavement below him. This is a man who doesn’t need napkins; a man who leaves a clean plate when he eats fully loaded hard tacos.

“All’s I know is he’s fucking loco. That, and he don’t talk.”

Nyn wasn't ready for that answer. “What, you mean to cops?”

“No, I mean he don’t talk. Well, sometimes, it looks like he’s gonna say something, and he opens his mouth, and then he makes this big fucked up sound like he’s choking. He only does that when he’s all excited, though.”

“Why does that sound familiar? Wait, what does this have to do with me doing **anything** for free? You're wasting my bloody time. ”

“I look like I fucking know? He’s better than this other dude I deal acid to. Crazy muthafucka’s always talking shit like, ‘consciousness was a weapon fired at the earth to make it destroy itself. I hate that little bitch.’”

“Now what are you babbling about?”

“Yo, that’s what I said to HIM, G. So, we gonna do this shit or not?”

Nyn sighed. “Have you dealt to him before?”

“Hell yeah, all the time. I just dealt him a shitload of White Clinical ‘cid. His neighbor told me he does like ten-fifteen hits at once and every time she sees him, he’s all fucked up out of his mind and shit.”

Nyn paused, analyzing Carne’s bad subterfuge. Twenty whole seconds passed.

“So what are you dealing him THIS time?”

“Oh, you know, just some shit...” Carne grew uneasy.

“Think about what you just told me, Carne. You deal to him all the time, no problem. But this particular time, you need a professional killer escorting you. Hmmm. WHY? What the fuck are you dealing?”

Carne looked around suspiciously, craning his neck and pursing his lips with

melodrama. He produced a tagging marker from his shoulder bag and wrote on a torn piece of napkin: “LPMT,” and then ate the napkin.

Nyn’s tide-like austerity sputtered. He felt himself lose control of both pupils. They dilated, slightly. A stray crumb slowly escaped his carefully manipulated weinerkaiser. All three men bore slow-motion witness like it was a life or death cointoss.

Out of strange, impromptu politeness, Nyn waited for the crumb to impact before speaking. “You’re not fucking serious.”

Carne faked a deadly serious look. “Hell yeah.”

“OK, how much are you getting out of this?”

“Well, you know -“

“And don’t lie, because I’m going to be there *with* you, remember?”

His face contracted into a badly hidden expression of ‘crap!’ He replied, “Hundred and fifty.” Carne’s gesticulations flung his condiments everywhere; splattering in the street like red, yellow and green roadkill.

Without hesitation, Nyn said confidently, “I get the hundred.” *Basic rule: Always ask for something twice as unreasonable to make your unreasonable request look half as unreasonable.*

“No fucking way!” Mad letters in the air.

“Fifty, then.” Nyn successfully suppressed a grin and tossed his spotless white wrapper in the trashbin. *Score.*

Carne felt it again... incompetence. He knew he was always getting shit deals like this because he wasn’t smart enough to outwit the playas. *Still, a hundred’s a hundred.*

“Ok, puta, you got a deal.” He turned away from the vendor, who’d been helpless but to

eavesdrop on the entire meeting. “What about this guy, Nyn? He heard everything. Should we execute him, yo?”

The vendor gulped and tightened his grip on the cart-handle.

But Nyn just laughed and looked the vendor dead in the dominant eye. “Nah... tracing leaked information back to its source is a mediocre science nowadays. This guy talks, he’s dead in fifteen minutes. C’mon, we’re going shopping for some things to make your little deal less conspicuous. Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

10pm. Whenever Howard was sober, the world took on a dull bluish-green tint making everything look like a Canadian art film from the 1980s. Except, instead of that trademark CRTC-approved, algae-tinted, no-budget graininess, every surface had faint, mandala-like fractal patterns superimposed on it - no color or definition – as if the patterns had been sculpted from thick air.

Howard figured his brain spent so much time in a state where he was aware of these patterns and whatnot that neural connections had been permanently etched, possibly causing him to see them - all the time - to a lesser degree. Since Howard spent so much of his time immersed in - and adapting to - rather alternate states of consciousness, sobriety had become the strangest of all psychedelic experiences. Once you lose your familiarity with the commonplace reality, it becomes one hell of a fucked up sadistic freakshow when you eventually return. Like being a ball of frustrated, unfulfilled desire; constantly irritated, pressured and assaulted by random hostile elements seemingly generated by the



immediate and too-rigid environment. All attempts at fulfilling the desires that frustrate you result in the amplification of your frustrations and the multiplication of your desires. A twisted gameshow existence jumping through humiliating hoops of no consequence and pushing Sisyphean boulders up slopes of diminishing returns toward the glittering and unattainable symbols of your desires. Desire represented digitally and dangled before you; creating both the ailment and the self-enslaving means of curing it.

Forget whatever they tell you about financial security, idyllic family life and toys of status. In the “commonplace” reality, the meaning of life is a) to not get killed, and b) to make up a much better meaning of life than the bullshit routines they feed you and do that instead.

The main thing about the sobriety trip was how amazingly inflexible everything was. It was a universe of pure math; a perfect, closed ecosystem of absolutes, constants and fundamental principles. But when you looked at any specific detail close enough, everything became hazy and quantum-uncertain like a deliberate misdirection. Since Joe Denominator is immersed in this odd reality almost 100% the time, he doesn’t consider it even the least bit strange. To him, it becomes an ironic *benchmark of authenticity* for all other possible realities. But to a man who observes this “mundane” reality in a completely unbiased way - viewing it as only one of thousands of equal realities - it’s ridiculously surreal. As weird as dreaming to the unaccustomed. A universe engineered out of rules that couldn’t even be changed by circumstances or time. You could do the sobriety trip once and not come back to it for months, or even years - becoming a citizen of *all manner* of bizarre alternative realities - and then one day, you come back to the “mundane” reality. Your name is the same, and so is everyone else’s. Sound is still

invisible. Triangles still total 180 degrees. Everything you let go of falls and sticks to the surface below it. You can instantly recognize people you haven't seen in ten years just by looking at their face or hearing their voice over a telephone. Everything is static and predictable. 99% of realities are not. But apparently, Howard's was, and that alone was a bigger mindfuck than mescaline ever was. Apply a similar set of rules to a reality like mescaline's and you end up with an epistemological catastrophe. And maybe that's why the feds were so afraid of LPMT. Thanks to a product of this mind-boggling consistency-worship dubbed 'the scientific method,' Joe Denominator's only valid test for reality became *consistency*... anything repeatable is real. But how can a predictable universe be a valid reality? A predictable universe seems artificial...

A quick glance out the window. There were about sixty of them now, some with signs that read: **AWAKEN, HOWARD!** He shook his head and closed the blinds.

*Apparently, throwing eggs at them makes them multiply. That can't be real.*

His brain was in no position to consider it relevant. Whenever he was sober, he chose to devote the majority of his brain's data processing cycles to hard metaphysics. He deliberately reduced all his useless mental processes to as close to zero percent as possible by avoiding television, pop media, consumerism, and socializing. A PhD in philosophy from K'an Monastery and an honorary Masters in mathematics from Berkeley gifted his brain with twin kernels that co-evolved into a highly efficient bipolar operating system. Carefully chosen books and thousands of hours of internet research provided the software; psychedelics provided the upgrades, patches, hacks, cracks and tweaks. When a person runs their mind in this way, all of their idle thinking is reduced to simple remixing... novelty data reorganization. Howard's mind was an eight-armed, blue

skinned DJ on a corpus callosum mixer throwing down every dope lick from Euclid to Bakhtin; mixing, remixing, crossfading, scratching and sampling all the math, science, philosophy, sociology, religion and programming in his head on the Left Brain / Right Brain decks. At this point his proverbial cup was full, and original, creative ideas were pretty much impossible for him to construct, leaving only the originality of remixing. The Aristotle-Kant A Priori remix. The Panopticon-Heisenberg remix, and so on...

The rumors about Howard having deliberately muted himself were true, and occasionally haunted him. This was long before his headfirst dive into entheogenic shamanism as a lifestyle. Although his master's thesis had been a geometrical system of cryptography (admittedly infantile compared to the cryptosystem of the LPMT cube,) what he was really interested in at the time was social/linguistic probability; in developing predictive algorithms. He knew that his research in those areas was probably trivial... some might even call it borderline quack-math, but he did it on the side, knowing that even if it never gained scholastic recognition, they could still use it to make the AI in multiplayer environments more realistic. He continued it well into his Ph.D., as a mere hobby.

He eventually convinced himself that all basic social interaction was predictable and deterministic. He had always hated talking to people, and he especially despised long conversations of pure formality where both parties walked away having exchanged no useful information. So, driven from within, he sank his teeth into his research with unquellable enthusiasm.

His simplified thesis was that social interactions were algorithmic, and that each participant merely chooses his next bit of dialogue from a predetermined set of standard

conversational segments, and then bases this "choice" entirely on the conditions leading up to it. The vocabulary changes slightly from person to person, but the basic flow of information turns out to be nothing more than an algorithm; an idiot-simple subroutine. [Greeting : Acknowledgment.] ->[How-are-you? : Fine.] -> [So what's new? : Not much.] -> [Nice consumer product. : Thanks, yours is nice too.] ...

Sober, Howard tended to regard everything in terms of hardware and software functionality: the body, including the brain, is hardware. All the information that you feed it is software. Religion is software. Philosophy is software. Dick and Jane books are software. Television commercials are software.

Eventually, Howard reached the irrefutable conclusion that the fundamental purpose of basic social interaction was mutual assertion and acknowledgement... nothing more complex than what computer terminology calls an "ACK." An ego broadcast / acknowledgment request and an ego broadcast / acknowledgement echo. Except, computers don't do this in the inefficient and obnoxious way people do. One computer nods cursively, the other computer nods back. End of conversation. Idle chat between people is like two computers getting stuck trying to out-ACK each other for twenty minutes... each attaching false meanings as complex as possible to the process. Howard understood that it would be considered rude to be in the same public place as someone you recognized and had met before, and not to ACK them back, but he never figured out why anyone would need to talk about sports, television, gossip and weather after having ACKed one another. *Why would you repeat the highlights of a television show to each other, unless you were testing the consistency of your shared reality?*

The more Howard thought about smalltalk, the more it chagrined him to belong to a species that did it compulsively at every possible opportunity. So, one day, he decided to stop being part of the problem and render his vocal apparatus physically incapable. During a three month retreat in a rented cabin in Northern Quebec, part of Howard's daily routine, along with meditation, yoga, reading and cooking... was screaming his chords out. Literally. Every single day for three months, Howard screamed till his eyes watered, and eventually until he physically failed to make noise; until the flavor of blood in his saliva sickened him, and even the slightest vocalization felt like deepthroating a rasp. And the next day, again with the screaming and the spitting blood. By the end of the retreat, he was still somewhat capable of vocalizing, but it was a painful, awful, nigh-intelligible growl like malignant throat cancer. As it got quieter, he continued this vocal exorcism as a habit until he became permanently incapable of producing any meaningful sound.

\* \* \*

Howard heard a knock at his door. The sober reality he was experiencing was so predictable that he knew it was Talia who had just knocked, and that it was probably around 10:15pm, and that she was probably ready to go with him to his big deal. He knew the dealer was Carne, which probably meant he didn't need her to hook up the deal after all, but then again, he was going to be carrying \$150,000 cash on the subway, into a gothpunk club, and trusting a gangsta not to rip him off. Howard had unfortunately never kept up the Northern Shaolin Seven-Star Preying Mantis Kung Fu he learned during his monasticism, and he knew he would probably lose a fight against just about anyone. His weapon was a thin medieval stiletto he kept in his sock drawer. So he came to the

decision that he needed Talia to cover his ass, and besides, he was looking forward to a night of watching *her* barely covered ass. Besides, he didn't even have dueling insurance, and there were a near-infinite number of reasons and methods by which he could get killed tonight over the course of this deal.

*Six million ways to die, choose one.*

He opened the apartment door and choked. He had never seen Talia dressed the way she was. The usual party girl style, he could deal with, but tonight, she looked like every comic book fanboy's wet dream. He gawked.

Crossed fingers; twisted palm-outwards: "Ready?"

Another thing about the sobriety trip was that people's faces didn't boil, and they weren't discolored or full of deep craters. She was beautiful; far more beautiful than the neighbor he knew. He snapped out of this trance and ACKed the "ready" sign. Talia grabbed him by the hand and they headed down to the TTC.

For the most part, a Latino Crew gangsta dressed up as a Goth just does not work. After they bought their clothes, Nyn spent two hours trying to crashcourse Carne in Gothic body language and demeanor, but it really wasn't happening for him. It wouldn't fool the regulars, but it might help to draw less attention to the deal, and it might help him disappear into the melee if the pigs showed up. Nyn, on the other hand, was naturally talented at disguise, and he looked smashing in his black eyeliner, black elbow gloves and black Electro-Conformist Therapy T-shirt. He sat two tables down from Carne, at the furthest point from the entrance, next to the fire exit. Tonight, the part of the door bouncer at Death Rattle was being played by Mitch, a Bloody Fist who happened to owe Nyn a favor. The usual bouncer was "sick" tonight. Mitch had rigged two chains of six

ARCH-violating flashbangs under each side of his jacket like Mexican fireworks, with thick lanyard ripcords down his sleeves and hooked taut around his thumbs. If pigs showed up, poor Mitch was under zero refusal to pull the fire alarm, tackle them, pull both lanyard rip cords, and hang on for dear life.

Nyn nodded cursively to Mitch as he sat and scanned the environment, calculating six to eight threat assessments per minute with a look of practiced boredom on his artificially pale face. No undercover cops so far; no one who looked like a major player either.

Mitch just stood there with his badass face on, fantasizing about having to pull the ripcords and kill himself and a couple of pigs in a barrage of impossibly loud, hot, painful POPs. He was sporting one of those self-effacing grins that were all *de rigueur* among the black-clad regulars tonight. Mitch desperately needed something interesting to happen to him soon before, as Nietzsche would say, "in times of peace, a warlike man sets upon himself."

Death Rattle was nothing much to look at from the outside - a tall, boxy, steel and concrete warehouse that used to be some kind of potato chip factory or something. The exterior was classic 1950s industrial architecture all the way, right down to the inadequately small windows up near the roof that the new owners had boarded up and plastered over. Inside was so radically dissimilar to the warehouse exterior that after five minutes inside, you forgot you were in Teedot altogether. It was a little-known fact, but Death Rattle housed 70% of all the alabaster in Teedot, as well as 9% of its European granite and 6% of its black slate. Inside looked like Dante Alighieri had run a contest - restricted to criminally insane 15th Century cathedral architects - to design Lucifer's

throne room. Except for the dance floor and the DJ booth, all of the lighting was provided by candles and ensconced torches. It had a few rows of drinking benches like cathedral pews, several oak confession booths for private conversations to be conducted under the pounding psychotic electronica, and long, twisty stone tunnels down to remote bathrooms designed to imitate the Paris sewers.

The crowd was the kind of nightmare you might have if you fell asleep in European history class. Tophats, petticoats, canes, cravats, ruffles, bodices, corsets, monocles, hobnail boots, rapiers, stilettos, main gauches, and a few bastard swords... every single regular looking suicidally depressed, bored, and three hours deceased. Taking the Gothic fashion as far as it could possibly go - taking it past clothing, past body language, past even personal philosophy: most of the regulars at Death Rattle held their conversations in rural Slavic dialects, or in Latin. There was no social environment like it anywhere in North America.

Most of DJ Solipsist's mix was typical gothic-industrial fare - heavy, dark electronica with distorted subbasslines like electrical currents and insectoid vocals reciting and gutschreaming morbid poetry about popular motifs like emptiness, death and nihilistic living. But about once an hour, she would break her set's neck and play a legato - a slow, emotionally tormented, more classically influenced piece. All the dancers draw their swords, and on that cue, everyone else gets the fuck off the dance floor to save their own lives from the most spectacular of all contemporary dances. Like a moshpit of graceful vampire marionettes practicing high-speed T'ai Chi sword forms within killing distance of each other, the entire dance floor becomes an artistic bio-food-processor. You can lob a bar lime into the middle of the crowd of dancers and it will not hit the



ground whole. As hiphop as deathgoth isn't, the legato is Real. Its dance is a trance-channelled state. Dancers' bodies are stunt-piloted by the darker urban energies of mausoleums, morgues and sealed stormdrains. A lot of tourists come to Death Rattle just to bear witness.

Talia walked in like she owned the place, Muramasa frogstrapped to her shapely hips with all the authority of a nuclear weapon. Probably the only Japanese blade in the house, but regardless, it suited her style perfectly. Howard was timidly allowing himself to be towed by her. It was Howard's nature to immediately start calculating architectural geometry in his head, and the geometry of this place confused him so deeply that his brain automatically began shutting down most of its own linguistic and social functions in order to deal with the heavy processing load. Pythagoras wrote  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$  on the inside of Howard's rectum with Euclid's red-hot poker.

Talia was still getting used to the dreamlike fact that she was armed with a Muramasa. She felt confidence she could barely even deal with, like she was walking around with pimp theme music and a snazzily-attired death squad for an entourage. Lots of pretty people were noticing the raw force of this confidence, and it was making them very, very attracted to her. Sexy, deadly, and at the center of all attention, Talia was in heaven. Growing up in orphanages made attention really important.

Howard was sitting at the table with Carne and Talia and he didn't even realize it. He heard his name a few times, but he was lost in golden rectangles and reciprocal angles, and his brain refused to respond.

"Howard? Howard! Are you OK? Hello?"

He slowly turned his head and met Talia's eyes. Two years of sign language back

and forth with Howard had led to Talia assigning a "voice" to Howard; a male voice that her mind had cooked up... a voice she heard in her head whenever Howard signed to her. She never thought about this or even noticed it before, it was just "Howard's voice" to her. He signed, and she heard a male voice speaking to her in her head - not English sentences, but with telegraph-style ASL grammar... all the unnecessary grammar, articles, and so on omitted.

Howard looked right into her eyes, and she heard his "voice" say something she didn't understand:

*"I think they used a negative value instead of Pi."*

Then she realized that neither his hands nor his mouth had just moved. She was in the process of realizing this as she mentally answered him,

*"Who used a negative pie? What do you mean?"*

Both of their mouths dropped open; bug eyes across the board.

Carne endured a long, uncomfortable silence as he watched Howard and Talia make understanding and excited facial expressions at each other for a good fifteen minutes. They were both smiling their asses off and making him very, very nervous.

In mere seconds, Howard and Talia had mutually learned how to share impressions, thoughts and memories so that they were initiated by *one* but occurred to *both* simultaneously. They practiced a little by sharing some simple memories and experiences. She and Howard experienced the first duel she ever won. Howard showed her what it was like to train at K'an Monastery, and he felt this tweak and energize the core of her warrior-spirit. She got brave and shared her first girl-girl kiss with Howard, who turned red, hard and embarrassed. She *fully* enjoyed what it felt like for him to turn

hard, red and embarrassed. And then she asked him to share something profound with her... something deeply meaningful and influential... maybe something he might have discovered walking the abyss of some psychedelic attack dose. Sheepishly, Howard opened up a little more and she he felt her feel him agree. She opened up completely. She felt something unnaturally aggressive happening; Howard's cognitive systems were methodically invading and neutralizing her own cognitive systems in a highly logical and unforgiving manner. Howard's mind felt to Talia like walk-in antivirus software with a fractal hall-of mirrors effect on every surface. She would freely throw out an idea she knew she could never craft words well enough to express, but nonetheless an idea she thought Howard might enjoy. But the moment she let it go, his mind swarmed it like algebraic piranha from ten different axes; analyzing; deconstructing, searching for weaknesses; searching for potential damage to existing value structures and systems; classifying it; comparing it to existing systems and structures... Howard didn't realize how intense this was for her emotionally; he only had access to certain spheres of conscious influence, and so to him, her mind felt all zenlike and floaty and swirly and Tao and above all *unstressful*... something he hadn't felt since he left K'an Monastery. Talia's intellectual atmosphere was a pimp mineral jacuzzi compared to his own cold, sterile framework of redundant traps and filters. From this little vacation, he decided on an experience with only a modicum of influence... something he experienced about five years ago. He was experimenting heavily with synthetic mescaline analogs designed by an illegal biochemical engineering application on his computer. He had a side deal worked out with a certain pharmaceutical company research scientist: he was allowed use the software and log in under the scientist's account without the system's daemons ever

rating him out to NeoPharm's demons. Any remarkable drugs Howard and the software created would be sent directly into the scientist's database for more research. If they manufactured any, the scientist took full credit for it, but Howard got some in the mail the same day; usually enough to kill himself twenty times over. It was a symbiotic relationship with the Devil, considering Howard's talent and genuine enthusiasm in the designer drug engineering field. One orange, upside-down Saturday afternoon, he designed this ricockulously potent mescaline derivative. A real mind-fucker of a molecule he suspected might double his perceptual bandwidth over time. He got some in the mail and massively underestimated its dosage... he ended up doing about twenty hits of the stuff while still coming down from the previous night's, er, *biochemical research*.

Next thing Talia knows, they're standing at the edge of a black shale abyss, surrounded by much blacker Nothing in all directions except straight down. Awful, hellish noises waft up out of the abyss: distant wailing and sobbing; echoed children's voices singing songs about idly making morbid little dolls stuffed with noses; deep furious roars, and the agonized grinding of rusted and impossibly gargantuan machinery. Talia fully identifies with Howard at this point; she's completely immersed in his telepathic VR, experiencing it as real and first person, exactly like a nightmare. Howard had no idea, but his mental systems were methodical, efficient, merciless and self-justifying crystalline structures that automatically started bullying and upstaging Talia's fluid, rule-and-principle-based mental systems; almost forcing her ego out of the frame entirely.

But, thanks to her fierce and unshakable independence, while she retains her name and generic self-image, to her extreme chagrin, she looks the only direction, down, and

spies with her little eye a brilliant white light shining way down somewhere near the bottom of this abyss, if it has a bottom. She feels a deep rumble that shakes loose rock from the cliff beneath her feet, and then notices the light again; approaching; growing larger and brighter. The rumbling shakes everything now; she feels it fuck with her heart-rhythm like bass drums at parades when she was eight. Chunks of black shale shake free and incinerate in the heat of whatever the fuck is on its way up like a supernova. Then she remembers she's been waiting at the edge of this abyss for what seems like two weeks now, peering down, listening, and waiting for this. The light keeps getting brighter, illuminating everything in magnesium white and blinding her; the heat tanning her flesh like leather, searing her arms and face, igniting her hair. She's enjoying this for some sick, twisted reason she can't understand. The roar at this point is absolutely deafening; sound that does damage to everything in its immediate presence. It is the sound of perpetual nuclear fission at ground zero; the sound of supernova; the sound the universe makes when it screams in frustration.

The near-blinding light finally rises out of the abyss and she sees it has a humanoid form; a massive, muscular, faceless being about a hundred times her size, white hot and screaming nuclear explosions. Her eardrums blow out and trickle blood. She feels the being speak directly to her heart. Its vocal vibrations come up through the rock, up through her heels and spine and resonate in the center of her chest, seizing her heart and using it as a vocal-percussive instrument which somehow, she understands, her body was built to translate.

The being roars within her... **"You have something for me?"** She nods and bloody tears streak down her face, baking mid-cheek onto their leathery surface. She

focuses all the pain that got her to this particular point in the flow of her existence - all of it - to the point where the pain fills her with an innate impulse to immediately self-destruct. She feels the being smile.

No hesitation, she hurls herself off the cliff into the abyss and is instantly vaporized in an orgasmic surrender to fire. The swirling black and red vapors; distillations of pure human pain and desire, float up in a double helix, each into one of the huge being's nostrils. It deeply and slowly inhales; holds it all in.

And with utterly sated and circular closure, it sighs as the roar of its fire slowly dies and diminishes down to the size and dimensions of the Talia it has just consumed and vaporized; identical in detail but now a more confident posture, a don't give a fuck attitude, and a colder, sharper spark behind her eyes. This being walks away to resume Talia's life as Talia. It will eventually return to the abyss one day, when she has experienced enough suffering and desire to detach, focus it all into her ego, and to once again sacrifice that ego to the phoenix of her true self. Howard had died like this more than once, and now Talia had, too.

It finally crossed Howard's mind that he'd been immersing her in something relatively intense while he floated around in her dopetastic mind-spa. He shut down that experience, marooning her in sudden and traumatic nothing for several seconds. When Talia came out of shock, Howard just sat there feeling guilty. Without realizing it, he had just instantaneously tempered and honed her warrior spirit by about five slow years of grueling experience. Nor did she realize it... yet. She turned groggily to Carne and said, out loud, *"OK, Howard wants to get this show on the road."*

Talia and Howard looked at each other and made the same face for no apparent

reason. Carne nervously looked over at Nyn's table. Nyn looked away immediately, making a flippant little shooing motion with his hand.

A thin, tortured-looking girl like a Victorian doll who had recently bled to death came over to their table with a tray. She had to lean in close to talk because her whalebone corset reduced her voice to desperate little whispers. She had a twelve inch waist, somehow.

"Can I get you... something to... drink?" she whispered.

Carne blurted out, "Double Dean Ween!" scaring the poor girl, who wasn't used to her clientele blurting anything. Carne sucked at this Goth shit, but he sure enjoyed his Goldschlager freezes...

Talia heard Howard think, "*I wonder if her name's Asphyxia?*" and they both chuckled. She thought, "*What do you want, Howard?*" He thought, "*Absinthe, double wormwood infusion.*"

Talia asked Asphyxia, "Do you have any Absinthe with double wormwood?"

The girl smiled a tortured smile and nodded, then turned to Howard. "And for you?"

Talia said, "No, that was for him. I'll have a Samhain." Pumpkin liqueur infused with salvia divinorum in a drinking horn. Asphyxia curtsied like a broken marionette and floated away.

Carne said, "OK. Let's do this shit." They nodded. "You have the money?" They nodded. "OK. First, I need you to take fifty of it and put it aside."

Easy enough. The money was in three 50k rolls in Howard's sweatshirt pocket. He could do that by touch. He nodded.

"Now, drop it on the floor."

Howard hesitated, then did so, just as a tall, thin goth in an Electro-Conformist Therapy T-shirt walked by their table and hacky-kicked the wad casually over to his own table, sat down, and pocketed it. No one else seemed to notice.

"Cool. Now. The rest is in your sweatshirt? OK. Stand up."

They both stood up. Talia's hand went instinctively to rest attentively on Muramasa. Nyn was similarly ready for shit to go down. Carne took off his leather smoking jacket and offered it to Howard.

"Here, man. Try this shit on."

Howard instantly understood. He put the jacket on and pantomimed feeling its fit and showing it off to Talia as he grabbed a small plastic baggie in his left jacket pocket and left a 50k wad in each pocket. They both smiled pretentiously and Howard returned the jacket to Carne. Howard's fingers fondled the pill as Carne's fingers did a rough estimate on the wads.

The drinks came and it was fat tips all around for poor Asphyxia. Everyone was tentatively happy. Carne went down into the Paris sewers to count some money and came back a very relaxed and contented motherfucker. They all let go of their blades and enjoyed their drinks, watching the first legato with quiet drunken amazement.

They decided to leave separately. First Carne, then Nyn twenty minutes later, then Howard, then eventually poor Mitch; intact. Talia stayed to participate in the last legato of the evening. Her performance was so stunning that she had to turn down a dozen offers for warm company in after-hours lounges, yachts and VIP rooms. Talia left Death Rattle feeling hotter than a Catholic schoolgirl with a battery-powered black rubber crucifix.



## Chapter Eighteen

Waiting patiently in a dank brick alley across from Death Rattle, Nyn had an amusing thought as his fingers found the soft coin in his pocket...

*What I'm about to take out, chew on and swallow was once on the inside of a living man's skull.*

Every Nod operative is a hashish eater. Thought to be long dead, then rediscovered by urban Kali cults, and later copycatted by the infamous DC Thuggee Posse, this practice remains one of the oldest still-living tactical traditions on Earth. Originally referenced in the journals of Marco Polo, the word *assassin* comes from ancient Turkey, the birthplace of the first organization of assassins, the *Hashisheen*, who were aptly named for their infamous hash-eating habits. Some have theorized that the Hashisheen's deified sheik, Hassan I Sabbah, (the Old Man of the Mountain,) used the drug as any cult leader might - simulating paradise on earth for the faithful. As a pivotal prop in stage-managed cult indoctrination logistics, nothing quite beats a relaxing, mind-altering doggie treat from the benevolent hand of the master.

But Nyn knew better than that. Paradise was something that even the finest hash certainly never was. Plus, it was a lousy reward compared to, say, two chicks at the same time. And there was no way in hell he would believe that he had been brainwashed. Really, who does? He was Nod, for fuck's sake, one of the ones lucky enough to get pulled **out** of Bloody Fist school before he got fucked in the head. *Of course*, Nyn reassured himself, *hash doesn't really combine with the conditioning and actually turn you into an automaton like they say. Not **anything** like what they do to the Bloody Fist.*

*There is, of course, that conspiracy theory that Nod has a strategic decision-making cluster and it actually does all the planning and deployment of Bloody Fist agents. Humans don't even have anything to do with the lower-level hits anymore. This cluster of frozen processors and memory constantly mines, scans, cross-references and analyzes every FOIA-available digital document: medical and police records; schools; news archives; library records; cellphone and wireless internet transmissions; SIGINT interceptions; satellite surveillance feeds; traffic and crime cam databanks; credit records; and so on - until it finds a 'cultural troublemaker.' The primary target is always somebody who, to paraphrase James P. Carse, is classified as an Infinite Player as opposed to a Finite Player... someone who refuses to play **within** boundaries and, instead, plays **with** boundaries...*

Nyn needed to believe that he had free will. He needed to believe that Nod hadn't used drugs, conditioning and information to rewire his brain and spine; hadn't replaced his ability to *choose* with a remotely configurable ops plan. But that's *exactly* what Nod had done. Nyn was a fully conscious, self-aware entity with free will when he left K'an Monastery, but Nod conditioning had effectively purged his ability to dream, his ability to act spontaneously, his ability to choose, and his ability to refuse an unreasonable order. Nyn emerged from Nod school with about as much intact free will as a Bloody Fist, who has about as much intact free will as a military attack dog. Nod had done to Nyn's human soul what public education had done to his creativity... ridiculed it, raped it, debased it, derailed it and sold it out for grocery money. His consciousness, unable to survive under such repressive conditions, went into torpor. Nyn was ultimately detached. All choices had been eliminated from his method... everything he did, said and thought was easily

provable as hard determinism. Nyn was the seamlessness between theory and practice, leaving no room for self, choice or will... *Bloody Fist didn't even **eat** hash. Well, at least not traditionally.*

No, Nyn knew from years of experience that the secret of the hashish-assassin connection was psychopharmacological: it calms the nerves; it removes your urgency to **try**, allowing you to just **do**; it gets your perma-chill on; enhances your attention to detail; encourages reflexive combat skills & mushin; enhances training; it makes you extra careful when being stealthy; it makes you extra paranoid when it can save your life; it helps still the mind; it disables the panic mechanism and it helps your reflexes train without interference from your intellect. These benefits alone are ideally suited to the art of assassination. Not that militant shock and awe Bloody Fist style; that *oldschool* Hashisheen prowl-and-perforate style.

Another modern benefit is that Nod operatives eat one to three grams of uncut hash, **daily**. They have massive tolerances to the stuff. Before an assignment, they will eat six to eight grams, going into a practiced ritual trance in which they prepare their bodies and minds for the assassination. The benefit of this is: you fuck up bad enough to get caught, you can demand a blood test. A person with a eight grams of Turkish charas in their bloodstream is usually considered by the courts to be an automaton - someone who is so heavily drugged that they have no idea what they're doing or why. Automatons get very forgiving sentences, which is fantastic, because if you fuck up bad enough to get caught, Nod forgets who you are.

Nod hash still comes from Turkey. There is a Nod-owned oasis lost somewhere out in the Syrian Desert, where there is a horizon-wide field of all-female indica.

Beautiful young Turkish concubines called Houris spend their days walking up and down the field with their hands and arms outstretched, fondling the plants as they pass. Their wrists and hands become completely covered with pure, sticky resin, which is rolled into one-gram balls and hot pressed into coins that are stamped with Nod's crescent moon logo and its motto, "Perchance to Dream." This is called *charas*; hashish made by fondling cannabis flowers with one's hands, as opposed to sifting out the THC glands with a screen and then pressing them. Hot pressing burns the sticky oil from the surface and firms the coin up a bit. Nod has a team of nine professional hash mules, all of whom have had brain surgery to treat life-threatening epilepsy. After fist-sized lesions had been cut out of their brains, they were offered five million each to replace the eye on that side of the brain with a glass one, and to have a ceramic container implanted where the lesion used to be. The slot in the eye socket stacks the charas coins into the container, which can hold over a hundred coins. The knowledge that all the hash they eat was once inside a living person's skull is a source of major amusement to many a Nod operative.

So Nyn was rather amused as he finally produced a coin from his pocket and popped it into his mouth. It was just habit. One measly gram was quota right about now, and it would do nothing but take the edge off.

He was waiting for Howard's bodyguard to come out of Death Rattle so he could follow her. He didn't mean her any harm, he was just a devout student of Eastern strategy, and his hyper-alert follow-through, a.k.a. "remaining alertness" or *zanshin*, was mandatory. The Bushido, or Samurai code, describes a concept called "On." On means something like "responsibility" or "duty." Practically speaking, it means that his job isn't ever finished until his master, (Carne, at the moment,) lets him off the hook. On is a lot

more grave in the Bushido. If somebody saves your ass, then you owe them your life until you both die. That's real On. But Carne never saved his ass, he just hired him, so he was only Carne's servant till Carne said "good dog." The fact that he had already been paid his fifty thousand didn't mean shit. This was follow-through time. Just in case. Say Carne's pills were duds and the bodyguard came after him. He would know where she lived. Even if he wasn't fast enough to protect him, he could still avenge his master's death, which was standard protocol, part of the contract, and not usually motivated by emotion. Nyn was all about procedure. Fanatical adherence to procedure meant 100% predictability, which meant he wasn't ever confused, surprised or out of control. Nyn hated being confused, surprised, and especially out of control. Finally, Nod can never know too much about bodyguards.

One thing that did confuse him was the confidence of the girl. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, and she didn't look physically capable of protecting the buyer all. But her posture and her character somehow made her seem... invincible. She had a mien of total master's placidity. Like the Kenshi. Like the expression on the face of anyone holding a blade in Hindu religious art. And, while Joe Denominator tends to clutch his weapon like a security blanket, she wore hers lazy, like it was a thirty year-old brown leather satchel.

And out she finally came, flushed and strutting like the Queen of All That is Cool. Most of the club's patrons who were loitering outside turned their heads to gawk at her, especially the girls. She was okay, but she was orange stubble-bald and elfish and Nyn couldn't even fathom the mass attraction to her. A lot of people went berserk for elf girls, especially redheads, but he wasn't feeling it. He changed back into business clothing in a

nearby alley to facilitate tailing.

He watched her put back a Samhain and two Crack-in-the-Boxes in two hours, so there was no way she was going to notice him tailing her.

She swaggered down Qin Street like a runway model after a cognac-dipped blunt. The kind of lazy confidence that sneaks up on your balls and flicks them maliciously. Nyn was starting to understand Talia's magic, and it bothered him.

Nyn liked his algebra with all constants and no unknowns. In Nod school, Nyn graduated at the top of his Tactical class with 100% for his now canonized "Isomer Theory." He eventually wrote the textbook.

Every operative studies Nyn's Isomer Theory in Tactical nowadays. Isomer Theory is to Tactical what the *Golden Boy Cypher* is to crypto; what the *Three Dharma Razors* are to Psy-Ops... 100% canonized.

A chemical is made of molecules. A molecule is made of atoms. A water molecule, for example, is H<sub>2</sub>O; one oxygen atom with two hydrogen atoms stuck to it. Most molecules have a standard structure; a certain way that the atoms stick together. An isomer is the same collection of items, but stuck together differently. They tend to be more asymmetrical and have different properties than their standard form. Nyn applied this basic chemistry principle to tactical theory, using it as a metaphor and a planning tool. The atoms are all the key players in your recon data: people, equipment, environment. The molecule is how those items typically interact. The isomers are all the alternate ways the atoms could possibly interact. Nyn demonstrated to his class how a tactical plan could be mapped as a Lewis structure, assigning values to the atoms based on a modified periodic table. Classified equipment, for example, has limited bondability,

since only operative atoms can attach to it. Illegal weaponry has moderate bondability, but it always tends to form unstable bonds. And so on. Nyn could map out every possible scenario and become aware almost everything that could possibly go wrong in advance. Nyn revolutionized assassination with his hatred of unpredictability. He was a die-hard agent of order.

Simple Lewis structures flipped around casually in Nyn's mind as he tailed the girl. Her walk was so loose, she seemed to railslide down the stairs to the subway. It also might have been the hash kicking in. No one else was around, so he couldn't just follow her down the stairs. Isomers went flip-flip-flip ... *run to the next station, run to the previous station, ah, a grill*. He sat down on the curb and loosened the ventilation grill with his high-torque cordless multitool, listened carefully for a second, then dropped down into the tunnel, silently landing ten meters from the platform. There was a soot-blackened service door indented four feet into the wall. He climbed into it and saw her waiting alone on the platform, grinning her hot little ass off. He had to keep mentally scolding himself for enjoying the scenery.

Then something unpredictable happened. Her calmness fell right off her posture and she drew her sword, adopting a classical kenjutsu stance. Turning away from him, she pointed the tip of her blade way out in front of her midsection; frantically turning her body back and forth in a semicircle. Nyn had no idea what she was doing, but he figured he should hold his position until she relaxed again. And then a solemn east-style beatbox faded into audibility: *bmm bm-tsss, bmm bmm-bmm-tsss, bmm-bmm-bmm bmm--tsss, bmm bmm-bmm-tsss* ... Next came the signature freestyle vocals of the Dark Shaolin's Abbot; Lo Fat Chi, God MC...

*...Like the no-shadow kick of the Wong Fei-Hung  
Shaolin rope javelins and ya gonna get stung  
by the vocal aggressors, the ruffneck monk bastards  
the white crane terrorists, muthafuckin drunken masters ...*

*This is bad. A little girl with a sword versus six Dark Shaolin, all dressed in their black monk robes and armed with a surreal Chinese arsenal. Everything from tiger forks to twin melon hammers. All Nyn has is a four inch ceramic combat blade. He is about to watch this girl either get raped and killed or killed and raped, and there is almost nothing he can do about it. Fucking unpredictability.*

The dark monks, all draped in black and saffron, form a semicircle around her at polearm distance, adopting various orthodox stances with their weapons. The abbot of the group; the biggest one with the huge wooden beads around his neck, slams his fist into his palm and bows aggressively to her. When he speaks, everyone listens.

"We are Dark Shaolin. You have trespassed on the sanctity of our temple without permission. Do you accept a challenge?"

A challenge? This makes killing her technically legal if she accepts. If she declines, they will almost certainly go away without fighting. That's how ARCH works. However, she might as well throw her Muramasa in the nearest trash can and never mention martial arts again, let alone teach it. Declining a challenge is the apex of dishonor, and will bring about the same degree of public disgrace on your head as brazenly browsing through kiddy porn magazines on a metro bus. Her mural would be



painted over by tomorrow night, and she would probably lose all of her friends.

But all of this is Nyn's perspective. Talia is resolved and slipping into mushin. Her face muscles relax. Suddenly, she belts out a chilling war scream that takes a chunk out of everyone's morale, especially the abbot, who she chillingly addresses by name, "Lo Fat Chi! God MC? Pfffft, yeah... WANNABE. I'll christen my sword with your blood, you little bitch! Prepare to **dieeeeeee!**"

And Nyn is thinking *holy fucking shit what a girl! What a warrior way to go out. Here's hoping she nicks two or three in the circulatory before the rest tear her apart. Fuck, I should really do something. Uh... Maybe not. Shit.*

Talia just stands there relaxed and confident, seething with command presence. The craziest-looking monk decides to test her skill before the others attack. He has a sectional whip with eleven sections of steel about the size of paint markers chained together with a tapered striking tip on the end. He whirls it in six different trajectories around his body, forming an impenetrable steel force field four feet around him that goes *clink-clink-clink-ping-ching-clink-clink-clink-ping-ching*. Talia doesn't flinch; isn't thinking. She does nothing but wait and see what her reflexes do next. Mushin comes naturally to her. The moment the metal force field comes inside her circle, she sticks her scabbard into it and jams it, the steel viciously wrapping around the scabbard, spitting bits of painted wood everywhere. She pulls him in a little and her sword arm takes the head clean off his spine with a single backhand swing. No hesitation.

Five monks take a couple of steps back, and one flops around on the ground like a fish.

A tournament fighter would do the wrong thing at this point, which is to leave the

weapon extended, drop the guard, relax, and slip out of mushin. (“YAY! *I scored a point!*”) A Kenshi, on the other hand, immediately recovers the attack and starts looking for the next threat.

The next threat is two monks with long, red-tasseled Wushu spears whose shafts are unnaturally flexible and can bend up to ninety degrees. They use this ability to snap out the spearheads faster than they can be blocked, in a technique similar to throwing a curve ball. She dodges these attacks with near-perfect efficiency; slipping and leaning a little, rather than taking big steps backwards. She has incredible *sabaku*; efficiency of movement. No wasted energy, no unnecessary movement, no flair. The monk to her left starts to repeat his attacks and she automatically sends several thousand layers of folded steel clean through the middle of his spear, leaving him with a three foot broom handle. He backs off. She instinctively grabs the shortened spear and launches it at the other spearman. He easily dodges it. His attacks are fast and furious, and she starts to have trouble keeping track of them, so she darts inside his circle... so close that his spearhead can't possibly reach her. His eyes widen, and she knows he will immediately try to regain his distance. With his first step backwards, she slips the katana under both arms and deep into his stomach. This sits him down on his ass as she snaps the blade into his forehead momentarily. Next threat ...

Nyn almost gives himself away by snickering out loud. Not only is he shocked and impressed by the bodyguard's swordfighting skill, but it's becoming hilariously apparent that the Dark Shaolin watch too much Hong Kong action cinema. One guy attacks while others stand around in a circle and change up their poses every five seconds. *Even with their dread reputation, they might lose if they keep that shit up.*

Another monk grazes her thigh with the tiger fork. Ignoring the sting, she grabs it just behind the prongs as it catches her thigh and yanks the monk towards her. *That's what you get for throwing off-balance attacks.* Muramasa pierces his eye socket quick and deep as she kicks him in the jaw with her left steel cap. He collapses spastically to the concrete, groping his own face and making a gruesome gurgling noise. Next threat...

The monk with the sawn-off spear and the one with the shiny melon hammers both rush her simultaneously from opposite directions. The unarmed abbot stands back, trying to discover weaknesses in her kenjutsu.

A loud, clattering noise and a bright halogen light come lumbering down the tunnel, blasting inches past Nyn's shoulder. The conductor, who doesn't get paid enough to deal with this shit, decides not to stop. By the time Nyn can see again, melon hammer guy is a double amputee and sawn-off spear guy looks like a field-cleaned ape. It occurs to Nyn that if tonight's deal had gone sour, he'd be dead and twitching right now too.

Talia performs *chiburi*, a quick sideways flick of the sword to transfer the gore on her blade to the walls and floor. Her voice sounds practically orgasmic; trembling with adrenaline.

"Pick up a weapon, abbot. I won't kill you unarmed."

Although the abbot thinks he could probably beat her at hand to hand, he *was* the dumb motherfucker who issued the challenge to the first place. He grabs a Chinese broadsword from the sash of the writhing double-amputee. Pulling it apart into two broadswords, he adopts a very antagonistic stance. Talia sheaths her sword. The abbot looks confused, and switches up his stance to more defensive posture. She speaks proudly,

"By the blood of Lo Fat Chi, Abbot of the Dark Shaolin, I name my spiritual weapon 'Keikan-Koroken.' "

At this point, Lo Fat's confidence is **entirely** false. With an aura of cool dominance, she walks casually towards him, unarmed; right into his circle, and stands there relaxed. She's standing right within striking distance, completely fearless. Lo Fat knows that normally he could cut her ten times before she got her sword drawn. But he can't. Her presence is paralyzing him with awe and fear. He feels like hugging her feet and crying, but he's too weak and shaky to move. Nyn has never seen anything like this. She speaks, not to the monk, but directly to his warrior-spirit: "Drop your weapons." They fall to the ground, making a tinny sound that only kung fu metal makes.

"Lo Fat! Do you prefer to live and tell the story of what happened here tonight, or to die and be reincarnated as a hungry ghost?"

He chokes on his words, "I choose to live in shame; in praise of your... *unparalleled* skill."

"Give me your hand."

Lo Fat Chi closes his eyes and extends a wet, trembling right hand.

She draws her blade about four inches out of the scabbard, grabs his right thumb, and uses the sword like a gangster cigar chopper. The abbot holds in his scream as blood from his incomplete fist ejaculates warmly all over her steel.

"I give you the name Keikan-Koroken," she says to the Muramasa.

"Now get the fuck out of here," she says to the abbot, who immediately tears ass up the stairs, leaving a thick trail of red splatter behind him.

"Who the hell are you and why are you following me?" she says to Nyn, gingerly

squeezing the remaining blood from the thumb and putting it in her scabbard pocket. *She would preserve it as soon as she got home... the thumb of the fucking ABBOT of the Dark Shaolin... infamous Lo Fat Chi himself... was going to be one motherfucker of a war talisman once she made it into a necklace...*

Nyn hopped down from the doorway and walked towards the platform. Once he had climbed into Talia's space, he adopted a suite of well-practiced body language developed by paramilitary psychologists which, in combination with anaesthetic language and tone, was designed to make most dangerous individuals perceive him as completely non-threatening. Most of the research data came from studies of wolves, silverback gorillas and metropolitan cops. He kept his distance. She repeated the question,

"Who the fuck are you?" She was drunk, but she was pretty sure that this wasn't the Man in White. The Man in White makes your soul feel violated and sick, like watching a snuff film. This guy, on the other hand, was completely non threatening... she could just *tell*.

"Hi, my name's Nyn. Can we go somewhere... with less gore... and talk? Coffee?"

Talia shook her head in disbelief. *I'm never wearing this fucking outfit again. Still, this guy DID just watch her smite five Dark Shaolin and trophy the abbot, seems harmless, doesn't have a sword ... Whatever he wants can't be that malicious.*

"Coffee? Dude, you know who you sound like?" She smiled.

"Who?" Nyn asked innocently.

She paused and slurred. "You sound... EXACTLY like... every guy I ever... castrated in self defense. What a coincidence, Nyn!" They both knew she was just

playing. "OK. Guess how many times I've been asked out for coffee by creeps like you tonight. Guess right and I'll do it. "

Nyn answered automatically, "Six. Seven, including me." He wasn't guessing at all.

Talia didn't know what the right answer was. She tried to tally it up in her head and couldn't. "It's your lucky day, Nyn. Let's go." *Never betray your cat-nature, even if curiosity is the leading cause of death.* "You armed?"

"No," Nyn lied.

"Well, you're lucky I took these fuckers out before they saw you, Nyn. I just saved your life," she grinned, "betta reckonize, fool!"

Twenty minutes and ten wisecracks later, they were sitting on a beat-up purple couch, resting their feet on the gas fireplace and sipping yarmulke-sized bowls of *Kus-es-Salahin*; a khat-laced Abyssinian Tea. Insom wasn't the best coffee shop in Teedot, but they didn't play cheesy listening, so you could loiter there for hours without mysteriously becoming more and more irritated as time passed.

"So, uh, what do you want, Nyn?" she finally asked.

"Have you ever heard of K'an Monastery?"

*K'an Monastery?! This is already getting pretty fucking interesting...* "Of course, why?"

"When you get accepted into K'an Monastery, you take monastic vows: promises to the monastery and to yourself. It's a verbal contract, more or less. Mostly, they have to do with taking your education and your training seriously, and showing respect, and not misusing what you learn."

"Uh huh." She was actually fascinated by anything to do with K'an Monastery, but the last thing she wanted to do at this point in her game was show enthusiasm about anything.

"One of the final vows has to do with not becoming part of the problem. You swear that you will never join a military, paramilitary or police force. Basically, if violence is your job, never take that job. Never disrespect anyone as a matter of work ethic. I broke that vow."

"You? YOU'RE a warrior-monk?!" *Don't lose your cool, Talia. Chill.*

"*Was.* But I sold out my warrior-spirit, and I have no right to call myself that anymore. There is nothing in this life I regret more than that. I was on a spiritual path, and now I'm using everything my brothers were kind enough to teach me to perpetuate the hatred and violence that they're trying to end."

Talia's jaw was slowly slackening. "So, like, what are you now? You're too small for a cop or an army guy."

Nyn glared. "Yeah. I'm a paramilitary troubleshooter. A problem-solver."

"Like intelligence? That's not a violent job, is it?"

"Well, let's just say that the problems I solve tend to be politicians and corporate CEOs."

"Oh." *Either he's a paranoid schizophrenic or an overenthusiastic film student or something. Still, it's interesting enough material...*

He sipped from his qat bowl with hunched shoulders, using both hands like a little kid with an oversized cup of hot, narcotic juice. *Pop the question. Do it.* "I was hired by Carne to make sure his deal went smoothly. I've been watching you all night. I was

following you home just in case somebody was, you know, cheating, and there was static after the fact. Then, in the subway, I saw you in action. That was poetry in motion if I've ever seen it. You've got greater warrior-spirit than most of the warrior-monks I've ever met."

She said nothing. *Let him keep talking...*

"And tonight, you made me realize how much potential I had, and how bad I sold it out. And I thought to myself, 'If this girl became a warrior-monk, she would definitely succeed where I failed. She will become a great, great soul. The world needs great souls.'" He spoke dramatically, but with deadly honesty.

The flattery was starting to make Talia light-headed. Her blasé shell cracked.

"Nyn, one time when I was young, I ran away from the orphanage and was hiding out in Chinatown in the alley next to Myung's Tasty Noodles with my friend Anya ... we were trying to score some free noodles but Myung's was on to us and wouldn't give us any. So there's this old man walking down the sidewalk in front of the Kaishaku Club, and all these Yakuza, there must've been like four or five of them, they all come running out of the club with their machetes and cleavers and shit out, and they stampede right into the old man. Now, you'd think he'd've gotten trampled, right, but nah - he was perfectly fine... didn't even lose his balance. The old guy starts making apologies to THEM and then starts walking away like nothing happened. And I'm thinking this is one superslick old fuck. So the Yakuza, there must've been, like, five or six of them, start talking all this shit and trying to start something with the old man. He turns around and we all see this sort of half-smily blank look on his face like he doesn't give half a fuck about anything. At first, the Yakuza think he just staggered out of a GMOpium den or something, but me



and Anya knew the score. When the leader guy got a bit too close, the old guy was suddenly holding this sword - poking the point right into the soft bit behind the Yakuza leader's earlobe. The guy lets his guard down and all his black tie homies back off and start begging the old man's forgiveness. The whole, time, the old guy had that half-smily look on his face... like he thought it was all just a game just for his amusement... ever since I saw that old guy in action, it's been my dream to go to K'an Monastery... to learn how to master- and I mean MASTER- the sword. Me and swords, guy, you have no-o-o idea. I thought that if I trained hard enough, and got enough recognition in the martial arts community, I might eventually meet someone who could help me get in ..."

*Overenthusiastic, Talia. Just chill. Don't be a spaz.*

Nyn went to the counter and borrowed a pen. He wrote something down on a coffee card and handed it to her.

"This is the address of K'an Monastery in Nepal. If you hire a guide at the Bhutan airport, he can take you there following these directions. It's a five-day walk, so bring camping gear. It's customary to tip the guide by giving him your camping gear when you get there. When you do get there, ask to speak with the abbot. They might ignore you at first, but just be polite and persistent, and eventually you'll get an appointment.

"Holy shit. Are you for real? Is this some kind of prank?" She looked around for cameras.

"I'm for real. Look, I fucked up, Talia, and I want to make up for it by giving the world a real warrior. I've never been more sure of anything in my whole life. Just promise me ... give me your solemn word of honor that you'll never break any of your vows like I did."

She could barely control her emotions. She whimpered, "Promise."

There was a long, comfortable silence.

As they contemplated leaving, Nyn quickly snatched the card back and wrote something else. A single word. Then he returned it just as quick.

"That's my monastic name," he whispered, "It's a secret. No one but monks can know it. So, if you tell him that I sent you here, he'll know it's really my recommendation. And I only get one, and you are definitely it."

Another silence, and finally she made warm eye contact and asked him, "Can I bring my sword?"

"They would love you for bringing your sword," he grinned.

\* \* \*

By the warrior-monk standards of K'an Monastery, Talia was incredibly unorthodox. "Rare" might be a better word, since the monastery entertained no such concept of orthodoxy. It's not that she was a girl; K'an Monastery had turned out plenty of female warrior-monks for nearly a quarter-century. She was actually quote-unquote "orthodox" according to most of the monastery's existent trends... Before she even learned their ways, she was already shaving her head weekly, practicing martial arts, and meditating daily. But Talia looked damn good bald; and her martial art was a cruel and unusual hybrid of Jujutsu and Pa Kua; and she meditated to dark, angry spiritual deathcore at one hundred-ninety beats per minute. Deathcore and yakuzacore did to her brain chemistry what most monks can only aspire to as an abstract ideal. To say that she

fully realized Nirvana at 190 bpm sounds ridiculous and possibly insulting to your average orthodox Buddhist, but in the immortal words of a certain Scandinavian diva, "I'm no fucking Buddhist, but this is enlightenment." Talia body surfs a raging, throbbing ocean of Serotonin.

She stole her big secret from Tantric sex.

The music, especially yakuzacore or Tibetan deathcore, wants to jack your body. Your body wants to be jacked by it, and to let itself be jacked. You take that overwhelming energy; that will to dance; that unstoppable force that moves you and makes you tap your feet uncontrollably at low doses and lose four liters of sweat to the dancrush at high doses. You take that, and you direct it inward. You do not let your body move. You sit perfectly still in a half-Lotus and keep your muscles attentive but relaxed. You let the music and its energy wash over and through the physical sphere, which forces it to move inward, to your mental sphere. Because it has to jack something. This is the first stage of transcendence, and where most people stop if they get this far. That energy, that fucking awesome force that can make a thin, weak asthmatic stomp his ass off for six hours straight, jacks your mental sphere instead. You think harder and longer and clearer and stronger than you ever have before. You're in charge of your mind like an autistic hacker's in charge of his computer. And most people stop at this point because they don't know about their spiritual sphere, or don't believe in it, or most commonly, they're so massively overwhelmed by their ability to think clearly for the first time that they have a whole lot of shit to take care of with their lives. Definitely useful. Definitely worth exploring and developing. **But.** Clear your mind. Relax it like you relaxed your muscles. Attentive but relaxed. Refuse the music access to your mental

sphere by paralyzing your intellect as well. That fucking awesome force will then jack your soul. And this is *fresh*. If your warrior-spirit had a golden spine, you'd be plugging it into the Hoover Dam. You can read everything the bodhisattvas ever said about what it's like to be enlightened, and think, "That's absolutely true, but they describe it so *anemic, so dull*." Our language just doesn't have the nomenclature to describe spiritual experiences, since most people have never really had one. And this state of existence, with a techno-monk jacking your soul, is where Talia's at every single day, making her a black sheep and an urban legend among Teedot's spiritual communities.

## Chapter Nineteen

*So what if I don't follow through on the girl? So I broke the Bushido, big fucking deal. Monastic vows are a bigger deal than the Bushido any day, and I broke that shit a long time ago. Am I Japanese? No. Do I look Japanese? Hell no.* Nyn almost went so far as calling the Bushido *a tool used by Nod to promote blind and suicidal obedience*, but he managed to stomp on his thought process in mid-blasphemy. *Anyone could be listening, even Tyt.*

Nyn was so impressed and astonished by Talia's mastery of the katana that he now found himself strangely inspired to acquire a katana of his own. *There must be extra fluoride in this execrable northern citywater. Something's seriously fucking with my acumen.* Since he'd been away from the monastic traditions for so long, and since he had samurai-class carte blanche as far as personal arms were concerned, he had long abandoned the idea of a spiritual weapon. During his residency at K'an Monastery, his spiritual weapon had been the tessen; an iron fan, but, deconditioned by Nod, he had long ago abandoned tessen-do as 'airy-fairy traditionalism-worship'. He knew some rudimentary kendo and kenjutsu from his former training, but his swordsmanship was certain to be very, very rusty. Still, some part of him wanted to be *as cool as* his soon-to-be monastic descendant, so he pulled a few local strings and was directed straight to a place called Trin's the following morning.

The aluminum riot door was rolled up, paradoxically indicating the place was open, despite boarded-up windows and extensive fire damage. Inside lay the ruins of a looting apocalypse. The store had practically been razed. Everything that hadn't been

stolen was smashed, burned or both. Behind the counter was a grotesquely fucked up Vietnamese seventies pimp, looking like an Asian Keitel after the mohawked Italian went ruffneck on his ass. His face was cut, disfigured and swollen; his knuckles marred and knurly like reddish-purple driftwood. Also, it looked like someone tried to set him on fire with a squeeze bottle full of something – most of the bare pink patches were thin curvy lines.

Seeing the proprietor in this condition rendered Nyn altogether too awkward to ask for a sword. He pretended to look around the store for a bit, failing to find anything meriting a false closer inspection. He turned and headed for the door. Trin called out to him as he was leaving.

"Hey guy, you looking for a sword, yeah?"

Nyn spun on his heel and put on his business face. "Yeah, actually. Um, do you have one for sale?"

Trin paused, then said, "No. All stolen. Latinos."

"Shit, man, that sucks. I know a customer of yours; a girl."

"Ah yes, the pretty red hair girl, miss Tritia."

Nyn did a double-take. "No. I ... I know her too, though... She bought a sword here? Wow. Small world. I didn't know she used swords. Anyway, yeah, I meant Talia."

"Ah yes, Heikageshi, the Black Shadow. Very lovely."

"Black Shadow, eh?"

"Oh yes. Very popular. Very popular."

"So when did Tritia come here?"

"Just yesterday, boss. She purchase a sword for your Black Shadow. Very rare, very expensive. Called Mu-ra-ma-sa. So, guy, you must be Nyn, huh?"

"Yeah, why? What did she say about me?" Nyn got his backhairs up.

"Oh, she say you Masta Killa. Mista Sandman. Very skillful indeed."

*What a cunt, talking level two classified shit to strangers. Fuck.*

"So, guy, you wanna move to Japan, or what?" Trin flashed his huge new platinum fronts, individually engraved with Viet characters and inlaid in creamy blue lapis.

"What, teaching English? Ha ha. No thanks." Nyn felt his company side start to regain hold. *What a spastic little plum-happy fruitcake this guy is. A real character. He's not even acting injured. Probably on crack.*

"Nah, nah. Train *Yakuza*. Very prosperous. Lots of benefit." Trin touched his nose, cocked his head and winked enthusiastically.

"Okay wait! Wait! You're offering *me* a career in Japan, where I will be training the fucking Yakuza. *Me*. The wad; the White American Devil. Training them to do what, exactly?"

"Oh, you know, Yakuza stuff. So you take it, yeah?"

"Wait wait **wait**. Slow the fuck down! Okay, listen. I'm *Whi-tey*. I only speak tourist Japanese: *domo arigato, sayonara, ichi biru*. How is this plan of yours supposed to work, exactly?" Nyn's cynicism defined him during times like this.

"Ah, it's all good, you know? I already speak with my main man in Japan. He say everything cool. Cool?"

He sighed. "How much?" *Poker face.*

"Mista triad man say three million Yen per year. Plus benefit..." Another enthusiastic wink. "...motorcycle, geisha, opium, penthouse apartment..."

Now Nyn was pensive. The conditioning in him was faltering. It sounded way too good to be true, so it probably was. But he knew Yakuza culture inside out and backwards. There was a way he could test the validity of this offer...

"Okay, tell you what. You get the boss man on the phone and ask him if he's willing to give me his *word of honor*, as a warrior, and as a family man. I want his word that he will deliver that offer in exchange for my teaching services; nothing more, nothing less. He does that, it's a done deal."

Trin was extremely impressed. "Excellent. Yes. Fantastic." He conjured a slightly charred leatherbound address book and started rifling through its pages. What Nyn hypothesized was: he himself was a bartering sweetener in a greater deal. He was one of Trin's impossible objects: a company man with company intel on the operational methods of an American paramilitary intelligence agency – cum – assassination market posing as an international lottery corporation – operates... right down to the tactical theory itself. Sure, he could teach them new methods of penetration, obfuscation and assassination, but more importantly, he could teach them the white devil's operating system. Trin would get ten swords worth a million or more each in exchange for him.

Trin pulled out the LPMT cube, squealing like a little schoolgirl as he dialed...

Nyn looked at the strange box and had another amusing thought. *The very same day I betray the Bushido, I get hired to train the Yakuza. Ha. I'm a work of sarcastic performance art at my best.*



\* \* \*

By the time Tritia noticed Nyn near a fruit stand on Koriiji Street, he was already in the process of simultaneously: changing his jaw position; squinting; slouching into a terrible posture that stunted him by three inches; putting a beer-logoed baseball cap on backwards; and going into the store to shoplift a prop magazine. Nyn knew his shit. The metamorphosis would have fooled anyone but her. She found a street kid who had asked her for change and offered her ten bucks, then pulled it away, and instead handed her a small, unmarked metal tin that looked like herring in beer sauce.

"When that guy comes out, run up to him as fast as you can and give him this, kay?"

Tritia made friends with invisibility, which further confused the diesel-blackened youth.

Nyn emerged two minutes later with a different walk, a different shirt, rolled up pants, and the latest issue of Cannabis Culture magazine. *Amazing*.

A sooty girl with blue and blond dreads and a Celtic knotwork band tattooed across her nose and cheeks runs up to Nyn at top speed. The sun reflects off the tin and catches his peripheral vision. A calming adrenaline isomer, available only to career killers, shoots into his bloodstream, making his perception and reflexes doublesharp. Just slightly quicker than sound, he grabs the wrist that thrust the glinting metal at him and unrolls his body along the arm, places his thumb on the back of the hand, his other hand on the elbow, and twists. The body doubles over from all the urgent pain shooting up the

elbow. He pushes it face first into the sidewalk, wrapping a knee around the throat, and sitting.

*The true mark of a warrior is to remain supercalm during the most panic-inducing situations.*

*Herring?*

He grabs the tin and scales it across the street, where it makes the world's loudest **POP!** and knocks a pack of window shoppers to the pavement with bleeding ears.

*Ah. Flashbang. Herring-flashbang. Crafty.*

Just then, a fine metal wire snaps tight around his neck, making a zipper noise as it tightens. *Fuck.*

*And me without my multitool ...*

He slowly gets up, making no sudden movements.

"Okay ... **OK** ... you got me. What do you want?"

*I might be able to get the wire wrapped around my wrist, but probably lose my hand ...*

He heard a raspy, throaty voice. It was Tyt.

"Whatcha thinkin' bout?" she asked playfully.

Nyn came back quicker and drier than Moet, "I'd have to invent a language and teach it to you before you could even *begin* to understand what I'm '*thinkin'* bout.' What do you *want*?"

"I wanna go for drinks with you and talk."

He followed the voice up the jiffy-garrotte wire onto the roof of the two-story building.

"Shit, Tritia, I thought they sent you to fire me."

"Why," she kept up the seductive schoolgirl voice, just to fuck with him, "didja do sumfing... baaad?"

"Well, like I always say, Trish, dogs and Samurai have such short lifespans because they always do exactly as they're told."

"Hrm." She made intense eye contact and licked her upper lip a little while doing something suspicious behind her back.

"How about those drinks?"

"Since you *suck*, you're buying."

"Yeah, yeah."

A little purple ten dollar airplane floats to the ground near the street kid's face, folded lengthwise down the pupils and nose of John A. so that if you tilt it up and down, he smiles and frowns at you.

*...pothead tricks...*

\* \* \*

A little while later, two of the deadliest non-government agents on the planet were sipping designer cocktails together at Heresy.

No live shows in the early evening, just dark industrial ambient, to, you know, "go with the decor."

The drinks guy at Heresy looks like a kind of bizarro-Christ. Imagine the White Euro-Christ of Renaissance fame, except swarthy, unlikable, and on the side of evil. That's Bob.

Bob approached the table in all his unholy Bob-ness and spat out the words, "what're ya drinkin?" The clattering of distant steam trains dubbed over the drone of a power plant's transformer array competed for their attention. (DJ Intravenous at his best and darkest.)

Nyn ordered a "Schindler's Twist" - cherry vodka and black ouzo with a spritz of D-cyanohexanitromethanol-23; a mildly euphoric industrial pesticide. Tritia ordered a "P2M;" butterscotch schnapps and cassis shaken with deuterium ice and strained through the thong of one of Heresy's loveliest dancers, a Pernod-and-Black-Ice, and a Deflowered Angel.

"You and your grrrl drinks ..."

"You love it."

"Yes I do. . So what's up?"

"I'm retiring." She produced a high-security key from a leather lace around her neck and showed it to him. This was no ordinary key. It was a triangular three-dimensional key with several moving parts; the kind of key that might arm a nuclear device.

"No shit?! Thirteen already?" *[nod]* "Daaamn, girl. I've been working five years and I've only got eight. You're out in two. That's practically impossible. This bitch is a roofless ghetto assassin, dawg!"

"Got that right." She fidgeted with the key's moving parts as she spoke. The key's proprietary mechanics looked almost... puzzle-like. "Nice touch with the accent."

"Thanks... but, holy fuck ... is Jesus actually here... in town?!"

"Not Jesus, Messiah.Yup."

"Teedot this time. Why *Teedot*? I'll never understand the logic."

Drinks came; steady. Bob leered at Tyt's tits every time.

"Yeah I've finished prep, finished recon, established proof, published it, everything. It's a simple matter of going right in there, doing my job, calling the garbage truck and all that. He's like *forty*."

"Whoa. How did he live that long? What are you using?"

"He's a recluse. Dunno yet. Depends on security. I always wanted to try carbon monoxide, but I never had time to set it up. But I mean this guy can't even fight. I could just knock on his door and stick my thumb in his eye. It'd be that easy."

"Heh. You should use mercury vapor. Absorbs into the lungs like crazy. Damn, girl, I can't fucking believe you're **here**, job thirteen, taking out a Jebus. Who killed the Christ before this one?"

"Show some respect to the Christians, Nyn, it's 'Messiah.' It has nothing to do with any religion other than the Cult and the Palmers, neither of whom embrace *anything* resembling Christianity. And you're talking about Lyl, December '99 - during all that Y2K bullshit, remember? They made her use those evil cold mercury flechettes they were so scared."

It was starting to get dark out, and a live band came onstage as if summoned by Bob just to fuck with their conversation... A small black stage behind a wide razorwire grid offered the dark musical genius of the Crackwhores, who kicked much ass. The Crackwhores were an industrial Celtic-warrior band with counterclockwise beats and authentic sampling from gut-wrenching emergencies at underfunded mental hospitals. The bassist is said to have been slipped some powdered pufferfish in Haiti by a houngan

and turned into a zombie. Haiti is the only place in the world where zombification is contradicted in a written criminal code, so *maybe*. The drummer is a shaven-headed eunuch whose body is covered in Celtic tattoos. They pound out psychotic variations on a theme - iron taiko rhythms, and horrifying electroshock sampling on a counterpoint loop.

"Respect to the Christians? Don't get me started on tribal cultures, uh, uh... condoms, AIDS, abortion, Ireland, Crusades, homosexuality, ecclesiastical child rape, missionaries, televangelists, witches, inquisitors... Jesus!" Nyn suddenly felt slovenly-drunk, and he was. And yet, more drinks came.

This time, Tyt had a Deflowered Angel - not a drink for straight girls. Crystal flute. drop a cherry in. Splash of grenadine. Tablespoon of clover honey. Half amaretto; half coconut rum. Heavy cream mixed with granulated kava-kava, floated down the middle. Triple-coat the rim with the masturbations of the most beautiful young girl in the house. Not a cheap drink anywhere on Earth, and actually a religious sacrament in a select few subcultures. She catches Nyn watching her mouth in anticipation of the first sip. She grins, satanically. Slowly licks the rim. Savors it. Watches as his soul bursts into white magnesium flame. Savors his torment for one extra second. Slams it back like a valkyrie and smashes the flute in the fireplace in one fluid motion.

"So, uh." He looked around, shifted and coughed. "Um, so didja find out any details about the retirement package?"

Tritia leaned back in her chair and propped her tactical boots up on the table. "Pppht. Nobody ever says anything. And yo, you're pissed at Catholics; not Christians. They're the ones who pulled all that ruffneck shit. Besides, sellout boy..."

Nyn interrupted her with a paralyzing glare. "Fuck you. You can't stick your thumb in his eye... he'll make too much noise."

"He's a mute, dick. Anyway, sorry. You didn't 'sell out,' you 'bought in.' Whatever, Uncle Tom-san."

"Shut the f—" *Mute? Wait a sec* – But the drink got to his head and he forgot where he was going with... *what was I talking about again?* Nyn decided to drop it and start over, patting her thigh a little too artificially. "Um, so, can you even imagine what this heaven of houris is going to be like when you get there, or what that key unlocks? I heard it was in Borobudur, Java... under the stone bells. Think it's all Shan-gri-La and shit? Are you ready for the pimped out life of a young retired assassin or what?"

"No," she sulked.

"Huh?! What do you mean, 'no?'"

After a long pause, Tritia finally sighed and said, "I'm in love. I can't. He means something to her."

Nyn just drunkenly gawked. He noticed even Tritia – the power-drunk – starting to slur a little.

"So I'm new in town, right? I'm doing some prelim, and I end up checking out this weirdofucker Howard because this local cult that he doesn't even know about thinks he's some kind of psychedelic Messiah, right?"

Nyn finally picked up on the previous "mute" thread and choked. "It's Howard!?"

"So I figure maybe he knows something, but he, like, can't talk, so I go into his apartment and he's THERE, but he's so fucked on that fantasy junk that he doesn't even see me going through all his shit. And Nyn, he was acting like a *fish*; flopping around on

the floor and everything.” She mimed neck-gills and pursed her lips for effect. “I’m just about to leave and someone starts knocking on his apartment door, so I wait. And wait. And wait, and they just won’t fucking let up, so I jump balconies and start trying to jimmy the lock. THAT apartment door opens and I see the most beautiful girl on Earth, Nyn, I swear to god, you would instajaculate if you saw her. There was no obfuscation out there on the balcony except for one crappy pot plant... you know how scrawny and pollution-choked balcony flora can get... so, wait... what was I saying?” She made a brash gesture to Bob, indicating a dire lack of alcohol. Double Atrocity: 4oz Pernod on triangular black ice laced with DXM in a transparent edible goblet... *dissociation for elitists*... “Oh yeah... so I jumped over to the next balcony, climbed up a level, and made it back to the one I’m renting above Howard’s.” She noticed Bob air-jerking in her direction, and returned a similar gesture. “So, like the chicken shit I am when it comes to girls, right, instead of meeting her, I just start spying on her. The full Ninja-Tek Platinum Kit: passive-inductive polygraph, nanocams, infrasound, *everything*. I rent the apartment above hers and get to know her. Couple nights later, **bayum!** I realize love this girl. I understand her completely. And, of course, I want her ass, big time. Three hours later, I’m in her closet ...”

Nyn started laughing uncontrollably.

"Yeah, so what? Shut up. I’m in her closet... and I watch her have some kind of nervous breakdown. She rolls out this rice paper mat, kneels on it, takes off her shirt, and takes out a huge fucking knife. I jumped out of the closet to stop her and we had the most fantastic fight ever, Nyn. She almost beat me. She used some crazy ass aggressive



Aikido shit... Anyway, I got her in a solid strangulation number eight ... and I couldn't help it, I kissed her. "

Nyn was gut-laughing right at her. "You have no idea how to interact with people, do you?!"

"It was beautiful, Nyn. You shoulda been there... Nowait," she slurred, "You shouldn'a been there. Anyway. I let her go and we made love for, like, four hours, and I held her there and I smelled her and I told her I understood her and cared about her and made her promise never to hurt herself... And then I disappeared from her life. Now I don't know what to do. I really *do* love her, though."

Nyn shook his head and accidentally crossed the line. "Love her? How drunk was she, exactly? I mean, does she even remember you?"

Deadly, deadly silence fell on their table for a little while.

Bizarro-Christ Bob brought more drinks to the table at that point, along with his usual, friendly, "And go fuck yourselves!"

Tritia noticed the word *iai* written on the back of Nyn's hand in blue bic. Nyn noticed her noticing, and explained:

"Oh. It's a habit I'm developing. You write the skill you're developing on the back of your hand so you're always reminding yourself to practice it all day. I did 'stealth' last week, and um, 'nimble' the week before that."

"Cool. But what the hell's 'iai'?" She pronounced it *eye-yay*.

"*Ee-aye*... like Old MacDonald had a farm. It's a Japanese sword methodology - draw-cutting. You're supposed to unsheathe your sword, kill your opponent, flick the blood off the blade and put it away; all in one fluid motion. Really cool stuff."

“But you don’t have a sword.”

“I have a clip knife.”

“How does that work?”

“He pulled the folded knife from its resting position on his pocket’s edge and pointed to a little metal knob protruding from the flat edge of the blade. “It’s got a little thingy so you can open it one-handed, see...”

She playfully clocked Nyn square in the cheekbone hard enough to drop most lightweight boxers, but Nyn was unphased. Drunkenly, she tried to clarify, “Yeah, genius, I’ve seen a clip knife before. I mean, how do you use it anything like a sword?”

“Oh.” He returned some goofy stabbing motions, then nestles the knife back in his pocket. “Um, I can’t really... kind of hard to explain... I’ll be right back.” He approached the bar and misdirected Bizarro-Christ Bob while he palmed a couple of limes. He returned to Tritia, remaining standing. “Watch.”

He took one of the limes and held it out in front of him, fixing his concentration on it the way a cat watches a wounded rat. He folded the other arm behind his back.

*What Tritia saw:*

Nyn tossed the lime juggling-height into the air. She heard a loud click as he quickly crossed his arms and two halves of lime fell to the floor. Her jaw fell open.

*What happened:*

Nyn tossed the lime juggling-height into the air. With the same hand, he pulled the clip knife from his pocket and thumbed it open in mid-swing; just enough to let the centripetal force of the swing lock it open; just in time to neatly bisect the lime in mid-air. He continued his swing into the crossing of his arms, concealing the opened blade in his left armpit. Two halves of lime fell to the floor. Tritia's jaw fell open.

Another visitation from Bob. Another round of drinks ordered over a flanged and remixed underwater recording of plugged in refrigerators full of Roman coins dropped into a heavily salinated pool full of radio-mutated sea lions. Nyn ordered a Torquemada; tequila, red wine vinegar and beef stock, served in a miniature i.v. bag with a little metal stand and drinking tube. Tritia ordered a Jenny's Little Secret; Goldschlager and cherry brandy with three pink marble-sized ice dodecahedrons made from the frozen sweat, saliva & pheromones of an ovulating seventeen year old strawberry blonde nonsmoker virgin on two hits of pure mdma..

"You and your twenty dollar drinks! Are we on different agency budgets or something? I'm the gear minimalist, remember - you're the girl with the exploding frigging sardine cans."

"Herring. So why are you in Teedot?"

Nyn just shrugged. "Lots of interesting people to kill."

"True." But she wasn't really listening. Tritia's consciousness was sloppily treading water in an ocean of intoxicants and wishful thinking.

"I mean, I could be like everybody else and work the online assassination markets, but that's so post-grad, I'd be bored retarded in six months. I mean, that line of work is 100% predictable. I could train a street thug to do that in four weeks." He thought

of Carne. “Now, Teedot, on the other hand. All corporate jobs. Privatized security, sometimes even samurai class. Strange reasons behind the hits. Morally bankrupt CEO’s. It’s just more rewarding I guess. I mean, in the markets, there’s no difference between the three *po-mo-pro* motives; political, moral, profit... in the markets, it’s all just profit.”

Recognizing a word she could comment on, Tritia regained a little attention and made eye contact. “Assassination markets...” she rolled an ice cube around in her mouth, savoring it; speaking around it through a sexy drunken smile, baiting Nyn’s composure, “are a legitimate lottery under the Profit Justifies Everything Act,” They both laughed. “I am perfectly free to ‘bet’ on what day someone’s going to die.”

“Yeah,” Nyn mused, avoiding eye contact, “and besides, the cool thing about the markets is, you get crazy Triad-vs-Cartel hits or HAMAS cells taking out some Austrian diamond magnate... hits that would normally have no reason whatsoever to take place. Hits where the mark gets rushed by just the kind of enemy he’s least expecting.” Nyn’s eyes bulged for a second and he pointed while he finished his sip, “oh, hey, speaking of *least expected*, I heard you bought a missile silo!”

“Yeah, how the hell did you hear that? It was supposed to be, like, my big secret training facility. I haven’t told ANYONE!”

“Jeez, I asked around a little. Hadn’t seen you in a year or so, thought you were dead. You know.”

“Yeah, right. So I was at this auction trying to get my hands on some US military hardware - surveillance stuff - and this Columbian drug lord asshole pulled all this passive-inductive sniffer gear right out from under me. But then, this ICBM silo goes up

for a dollar cause it's rusted and flooded and shit. I had to have it, and almost nobody was bidding, so I eventually got it for two-fitty."

"Score."

"Yeah. So I ended up talking to the Columbian fuck and not only did I get the sniffer gear out of him, he knew some guys who pumped out the silo, paved over the hatchdoors and even painted the damn thing for me. All I had to do was one really messy, high profile hit on some witness protection guy."

Nyn grinned. "That was you?"

"Of course not. So I put climbing holds all over the inside of the silo, ropes, nets, trapezes and tightropes. I'm like a freekin' spider monkey in that thing."

He experimentally patted her on the thigh, preparing to counterattack. "That's awesome, Tyt."

Her whole demeanor went spontaneously aggro. "You know I fucking hate that name, and I will syringe your punk ass with hantavirus-3 if you use it again."

He pouted aggressively. "Poor Tyt doesn't like her assassin name. Why not, Tyt?"

Bob yelled at them from behind the black leather bar. "You two pipe down over there or I'll start putting the urinal ice in your drinks!"

Just then, Carne Asada stumbled in, looking like a drunken cholo, obviously having been kicked out of another bar in the area. He was sporting a brand new Pendleton and a crisp red bandana low on his brow; barrio warrior style.

"Yo Bob! I just made, like, the sickest deal of my *life* and shit, and so y'all best be hooking me up with a whole fuckin *table* of them twenty dollar drinks, ese."

“Money talks, jackass. Does your big fat ego have an agent or a PR guy I can deal with instead?”

Nyn whispered to Tritia, “I just escorted that guy to a hundred-and-fifty-k LPMT deal last night. I got fifty. For one pill.”

“You’re a price gouging motherfucker. Does he realize how bad he got ripped?” Tritia was successfully pretending not to recognize Carne. *Nyn must not know that she hooked him up with Carne... Nyn invented isomer theory, fucking smartass, he’d get drunk, do a what-if isomer, and figure the whole thing out in two hours.*

Nyn chortled in a drunken falsetto and slowly smacked the table with his open palm. “Does he *look* like he realizes how bad he got ripped?”

“Point. Can I ask who the desperate loser is who wants to spend a hundred-and-fifty-k and risk a media-circus death sentence just to go to some fantasyland?”

“You’ve met, actually. Your girlfriend’s neighbor. Howard.”

She resisted the urge to find out how much Nyn actually knew. “No WAY. That guy? You should read the shit that comes out of that guy’s head. I don’t think fantasyland wants him. That’s fucked up.”

“Truth.”

Carne had been checking out Tritia since he staggered in, and he eventually walked over to the table; two-fisting a pair of Cyprus Chills; a drink almost specifically engineered to feed to girls one intends to molest. Tritia saw all this coming a mile away.

“Yo, sweetness, wassup? Is this guy bothering you?” He nodded amicably to Nyn, who mostly ignored him.

“No, that would be you.” Tritia turned her body at a forty-five degree angle to Carne; pure defensive reflex.

“I got you some drinks to like, celebrate your beauty. Trade you one of these for a taste of your Leg McMuffin.”

“Fuck off, Chaparro.” she hissed.

“I’m five-four and a half, puta! Nah, juss kidding, it’s cool, baby. I’ll just leave these here for you, and like, maybe thank you for that deal you hooked up for me earlier...”

Carne put the drinks on the table, sloshing them everywhere. Nyn noticed Tritia checking his eyes for some semi-important reason, but he saw no necessity whatsoever in interfering with all this free entertainment. He knew something hilarious was about to happen. As Carne touched Tritia’s shoulders with his wet, sticky hands, Nyn was just beaming with anticipative mirth.

In one single, flawless motion, Tritia reaches between her legs in an act of lethal nonplussedness and grabs the metal chair she’d been sitting on by its two front legs, flips it up in front of her, and brings it down with a reverbrating CLANG on top of Carne’s head. She quickly moves behind him and puts a ribbed white plastic ziptie around his throat, pulling it tight enough for the strategically placed inner nodules to depress both carotid arteries. This leaves him with about ten seconds of consciousness, which she reduces to about six seconds by following up with a hard foreknuckle punch abruptly rammed into his solar plexus, forcibly depleting the rest of his air with a painful high-pressure belch. She pulls him to his feet and kisses him softly as he blacks out. Heaving a jaded sigh, she drags him out the kitchen door and into the back alley where the cooks

all smoke. She cuts the ziptie, palm-heels his spine a few times to shock his central nervous system back into action, whispers to him, “NEVER fucking talk about any deal,” and tosses his sorry thug ass Judo-style into the dumpster lid; *rebound shot*.

She could go back to the table, but that might mean having to pay for her drinks, so fuck it... she had business to take care of. Three of her isomers still alive and well, she had to make a few calls to Japan and get her ass down a hospital laundry chute. *Just think in black and white. Black and white.*

*Black and white. Like many creatures on Earth, human biology is binary-symmetrical - two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, two hands and feet and two brain halves each controlling a side, and therefore the consciousness that inhabits this biology is forced to process all sensory input as plus versus minus, black versus white, rods versus cones, safe versus dangerous, friend versus enemy, pleasure versus pain and good versus evil. Other conscious biologies interpret reality in various ways, shaped by their physical biostructures, and have physical forms that reflect this. Expecting one and experiencing the other is, more or less, the source of all suffering, anxiety and stress. Black and white.*

*Howard would probably be dying for the first time right about now, so she didn't have much time before he was born again... for some reason, Messiahs often immediately try again, and they always reincarnate in the same general area... the rest is, according to Nod, on a need-to-know basis... and they were right, she didn't.*

\* \* \*



## Chapter Twenty

Carne's spiritual weapon was a serrated ka-bar-style combat knife he'd christened *El Mariachi*. He'd only been carrying and training with El Mariachi about a year since he got dangerously k-holed one night at Marat / Sade and subsequently lost José, the most powerful spiritual weapon his fists ever gripped. The nightclub where this tragedy occurred was a chemical oasis for Teedot's players and dealers, and it also had the longest name for a club in the whole world: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade*. But everyone just called it *Marat / Sade*, just as everyone did with the Peter Weiss play.

Until he lost it that night, Carne's one and only weapon throughout his illustrious career as a middleweight pro-freestyle thug was a very tribal-looking baseball bat named *José Canseco*. José had actually once belonged to a 20<sup>th</sup> Century baseball player by that name, and it even bore his autograph in black Sharpie. Carne knew very little sports trivia, so he carried José Canseco for many years under the glorious delusion that it had once been wielded by a true Latin sports hero, while in reality, José Canseco had been a mulleted white country boy with a .266 / 462-homer career and a criminal record teeming with violence; both domestic and recreational.

It was common practice to talismanize your weapon or its scabbard using remnants of your defeated enemies (such as strings of teeth or chunks of scalp,) and José was no exception. Each of Carne's fallen opponents had their own chunky reddish-brown stripe around José Canseco's shaft. Carne glazed over the blood-stripes as he added them

so they wouldn't just flake off. It was his pride and joy. It was his courage and attitude. It was the seat of his warrior-spirit. And it was gone, forever.

See, there was an extremely popular surrealist flavor of television called Hypnagog. It had three channels; all variations of the same concept. Channel P consisted of a background of spacey ambient or doubled-up echoey sampling; plus a six-second soundbite or sample; a bizarre image; and a randomly-generated text caption... All shown simultaneously at six-second intervals. The captions were distinctly interesting, since they got their randomness from multifarious bits of noise off the internet run through deliberately mediocre speech recognition software. This process constructed bizarre-as-hell, yet grammatically perfect phrases, such as, "I flatten a humid god," accompanied by, say, an image of a gingivitis-afflicted mouth, and a sound clip of robot aliens from an old 1980s TV show going, "Exterminate! Destroy! Exterminate! Destroy!" ... Channel P2 was the same idea, except the caption and image only lasted as long as the length of the sound byte. Channel P3 was rumored to cause schizophrenia, especially in the still-forming brains of children: 0.333 seconds of sound, image and 2x-randomly generated captions at different velocities; rapid-fire; overloading your empirical filters with three kinds of random information twenty times a second, implanting twenty randomly-generated subliminal messages per second into your unfiltered subconscious. They claim that all flavors of Hypnagog force the brain to make synaptic connections between unrelated areas of the brain, since the brain is involved in a perpetual struggle to make logical connections between all input. They say it's like steroids for your lateral thinking muscles. Hypnagog was fucking *awesome*.

Hypnagog was originally invented by the Palmers of Light as a religious sacrament. They dug one of Howard's old open source randomness projects from a University comp-sci course, and they turned it into a brilliant installation of non-repetitive surrealist media. They believe that as long as *someone* watches it, it is capable of generating a near-infinite volume of ideas which no consciousness has ever before conceived, and furthermore, they believe that all a consciousness really needs to do to play minor league god is to watch Hypnagog for a while, preferably while mediated by a little chemical something-something to wedge open the perceptual bandwidth. He or she will be actively creating the Universe at a fantastic rate just by doing so, and thus qualifies as god by definition.

It was a time when true randomness was the new Holy Grail... to coercively nudge the universe into being characteristically witty by accident. So Hypnagog, generating at least two good jokes per minute, gained viral underground popularity among everyone from intellectuals to surrealists; from neo-renaissance painters to entire drug cultures. A handful of enterprising mass com hackers eventually brought it guerilla-style to broadband, and in no time, Hypnagog was an increasingly visible staple in metro apartments everywhere. Although the Palmers never got much credit for the invention, they were actually very, very happy that it was being installed in so many secular and square-consciousness-dominant households, (*especially* Channel P3,) smearing so many millions of suggestible minds with that rawsexy Eris that keeps the universe from restricting itself to death.

Once Hypnagog had become a minor institution, the coveted jobs followed. A team of enviable bastards got full time jobs involving getting really high and wandering

around downtown with digital cameras: interacting with weirdos and junkies in order to capture lots of interesting and unique local images and sound bites for Hypnagog's ever-growing pool of sensory chaos.

One of these lucky bastards was a self-proclaimed dadaist and ketamine addict named Tiberius Momo, whose primary passion was to make metaphysically symbolic musical instruments out of children's toys. Tiberius was at Marat / Sade one night fucking with people and recording their reactions. As he downed his fourth syrupy green dissociative shooter, he decided that *it would be absolutely priceless to get some footage of a real Latino homeboy all fucked up on an attack dose of K... especially if said homeboy wasn't **expecting** an attack dose of K. Mwu-ha-chuckity-chuckle-fuckin-**HA!** Hypnagog would air that shit for sure.* Tiberius would get a fairly chunky commission for the material, and with that, he could purchase a colorful plastic Fisher Price piano, which would be thus liberated from its commercially oppressive toy store habitat and fully actualized as the **Piano of Mutable Good and Evil**. *Oh yes.*

Carne had never tried K before. When it suddenly hit him, he was in an ultra-comfortable warm black vortex of nonlocal fuzzy-blanket awareness. He had no idea what was happening, but his insane jabbering and abstract, involuted responses to Tiberius' interview did **indeed** find six seconds of fame on Hypnagog a few weeks later. In his k-hole, Carne temporarily realized that violence was wrong, and gave José Canseco to Tiberius, who ended up trading it with Trin in exchange for eight grams of GMOpium and a faux-resin Maitreya Buddha incense burner (originally priced at \$140, marked down to \$20.)

José Canseco now sits as a decorative Western mantelpiece in the boardroom of Matsubara Industries in Tokyo.

Nyn will eventually go to bat with José in that very same boardroom to save his own life; slicing and puncturing the frontal lobe of a Samurai-class bodyguard with myriad shards and fragments of his own nosebone and brow.

\* \* \*

*What am I doing in this reality again? This is all wrong.*

The Man in White has a name, but he doesn't know it. Back when his mind was an angry puzzle, he saw that name, Wim Nightscales, on the front page of a newspaper somewhere. He swore he knew that name from somewhere. That poor little guinea pig, who wore a tag with a barcode that said *NIGWIM-1* on it, had reportedly bitten his doctor to death during an unsupervised electroshock therapy treatment. And then he just vanished. He thinks the story sounds awfully familiar, like the vague details of a childhood dream.

*Maybe something like that happened to me in a previous life.*

But his mind isn't an angry puzzle anymore.

*If you cut each jigsaw puzzle piece into a perfect square, every piece fits together with every other piece, and that's just what he had done.*

*Separate from one's environment, eliminate all internal conflict, strip oneself of all individual components.*

He is not even a *he*. The Man in White does not identify himself as a man. He is an event. When he breathes, that is the Man in White happening, or, if you like, the “Man in White breathing phenomenon.” When he sleeps, that is the Man in White happening. And when he kills, that’s the Man in White happening to someone else. There is not; will never be; *has never been* any such illusion as an “ego.” No mental chatter about one’s “self,” or of the consciousness-crippling vicious circles of one’s thoughts and fixations. He thinks, but only about what is happening here, now, in the [what I do || what happens to me] continuum. Sometimes, when the voices get painfully loud, he’ll catch himself trying to predict the future or remember the past. But the fresh clove oil on his katana acts as a safety reflex and pulls his consciousness back out of the deadly quicksand of selftalk. His own personal olfactory mantra; when he smells cloves happening, he goes blissfully blank and ready again.

His existence is divided between two worlds. In one world, whatever feels right usually happens. Things that aren't happening will, from time to time, arise in his mind, and then shortly afterwards, they **are** happening. Usually, there is someone familiar near him. Sometimes, there is a tiny bald girl who is very good at fighting. He always made an effort to ensure that *extra*-strange things always happened to her in that world. One time, he cut off her jaw and told her to sing. That was funny. Everyone else in the room thought it was funny, too. The only thing he loved more than showing the dreamers the most abstract of experiences was to make them laugh. Genuinely. Yes, to make them laugh so hard that their poor lifeless otherworld bodies laughed in tandem with them. At least his voices had an entertaining home. It was the very least he could do for those poor voices.

The other world, the one where he definitely shouldn't be right now, is some kind of awful recurring nightmare. There are all these voices with no physical forms making terrible, accusatory noises that can get nasty enough to cripple him with emotional pain. Here, he has one of those problematic 'egos' and he doesn't understand it. He feels guilty because he knows he is somehow responsible for trapping all these wretched voices here in this world somehow. His ego has a *functional* role in this world ... he is an active force of causation. The nature of this particular reality is that things need to occur, but they also need agents to cause them. He is just such an agent, but all he knows so far is that his purpose has something to do with voices. He learned this by pure introspection ... by taking his microcosm and applying it to his macrocosm:

See, all these tormented voices happen to him and then he feels bad... *Stimulus.*

He gets dressed, goes out, and frees the voice of a worthy prey from its otherworld body with his trusty sword. *Response.*

He feels better... *Reward.*

The voice he frees joins the haunting chorus of other disembodied voices that make him feel bad. Now worse than ever... *Perpetuation.*

After once witnessing true reality in some hospital, all that fascinated him about this world anymore was the apparent chaos of the perfectly ordinary; chaotic patterns in marble, wood, grass, smoke, cream in coffee... it all seemed so REAL, too real. He'd sit and silently watch rainbow swirl patterns in polluted water for hours on end.

He likes the other world much better, since there's never any real need to do anything. No sense of duty or urgency, and above all, no feeling bad most of the time. In the other world, his purpose is basically just novelty. Always make something new

happen. At first, he would only manifest beauty-oriented novelty, but he exhausted the possibilities very, very quickly. Beauty was limited, but atrocity seemed to be infinite.

There was this nagging feeling that both worlds were somehow connected, (perhaps through fear and desire; or maybe laughter and terror) but there was no hard, deductive evidence to substantiate anything. All of a sudden, there he was in one of the two worlds, with only vague memories, if any at all, of the other world. The only thing he knew for sure about the two worlds was that they alternated. If he finds himself in one world, he can be sure that he has just come from the other world.

Each world seemed to feed off the novelty of the other; as if one would starve and necrotize without consuming the novelty of the other.

The most unusual thing happened to him once. Maybe it happened right now. He has just finished freeing a voice from its body and he suddenly feels the presence of the bald girl. The one from the other world. He is sure, beyond any doubt, that it's her. She never speaks in the other world ... she doesn't even have a voice for him to free. *So, he figures, if she exists in this world too, maybe she is the same thing I am.* And just like that, he feels love for the first time. And the jigsaw pieces grow irregularities... novelties in the wrong world, like toxins. And he collapses; paralyzed by total reality incomprehension. Trapped between worlds indefinitely.

There are men who come and take him to a hospital. Lots of other confusing things happen, running the gamut from arabesque to grotesque and back. In the other world, he tries desperately to ask the bald girl for help, but she is too far away to hear him.



Then he gets restrained and is forced to swallow some autumn yellow and some fire engine red, and neither world exists anymore.

*But maybe that isn't... yet.* No, He didn't seem to be in any hospital. No. It was outdoors now... an alleyway. *Oh right...* voices, cloves... tonight, he hunts a worthy prey.

He doesn't know who yet. He will know who when he looks at the corpse's distended face and remembers the way it tried to preserve its own life. The unevolved always think they can use words to survive. Make deals. Offer money. Talk about wives and children. It's not worth it. All that bullshit. All just monkey noises. Sure, language separates us from the animals, but how many animals ever got themselves killed trying to chat their way out of a violent confrontation?

He doesn't know who yet. He dislocated his mind an hour ago, when the familiar scent of clove oil wafted up his nostrils from the hard, oiled skin of his unsheathed katana. Scents are the most powerful triggers. Whenever the oiled steel comes free, he immediately enters mushin. His reflexes puppet his fast-twitch muscles, pure and unconscious. No-mind. He is a kenshi warrior of pure instinct, flawless reflex and nightmarish precision. The ultimate weapon is detachment.

Thinking interferes with combat. It creates hesitation, telegraphing, flawed strategy, bad timing and a whole slew of emotional interferences such as pride, anger, cockiness, self-doubt and fear. The scent of cloves kisses his olfactory membrane and his mind floats away to the place where comas, dreams and near death experiences are

happening. His body is a better warrior than his mind. His body can smell fear. His body can predict an attack from the original muscle twitch. His body knows which of the enemy's feet has more weight on it; knows to snap out and hit the sternum during an inhale rather than an exhale; knows exactly where that concealed knife is...

He doesn't know who yet. His mind is dislocated. His eyes are glazed over like a shark about to feed. He feels his surroundings with extreme alertness. Motionless, waiting for sudden movement or noise. Somewhere in the nether regions of his mind, his feet feel cold and slightly numb. His white trenchcoat is flapping in cold, polluted wind. His right boot is tied tighter than his left. His grip on the katana is slightly too rigid, which reduces speed and maneuverability and reaction time by at least one quarter of a...

(and the scent of cloves deals with all this internal noise)

He has been perched on his haunches like this for an hour now, unflinching. His perch is a wide concrete jut above a recessed doorway in the very same shadowy downtown alley where he once neatly bisected a wino. The wino had been a worthy prey. No words or bullshit. The moment he realized danger he threw his sherry bottle, aiming with drunken accuracy at Wim's head. But he missed. Now that's a worthy prey. No hesitation. The wino lost his knife arm at the elbow before the hand made it out of the pocket; fought the remaining ninety seconds of his life with a neatly severed arm hanging out of his pocket. Reckless and committed. No hesitation.

(cloves again...)

His body feels the inky liquid shadows around him soaking aggressively into his skin. It fills his lungs when he inhales. It sends nearly invisible ripples into the distance when he moves. The ink is infectious. It taints his blood and will eventually turn him into

pure shadow. The katana feels this too. His body cannot remember a time when the oiled blade has not been within arm's reach. Verified and certified by each of the 47 Ronin, the katana named *Silencer* houses his soul, and it bestows voices to innumerable other souls. Most of them are easily cut loose by the alarming trauma of the experience and go free, floating up to the place where his mind is now... the coma place. Where all the voices are united with their souls. Each soul, when freed, becomes one with a new voice. There are always new voices. The only way to shut the fucking voices up for a while is to give the voices more voices.

He is perched above Poe's doorway; his mind is nevermore. The shadows stain and poison him. Silencer waits patiently to pilot his senses and reflexes and perhaps establish a little temporary silence via the union of another voice with the rest of the morbid party. But cloves help him to erase all such combat-inhibiting distraction from his mind and wait patiently blank for a target of opportunity.

He is Wim right now, but he is *also* the Man in White right now. This is a predicament he cannot understand. He is not a murderer. They murder themselves; even the worthy prey. They have not developed their skills or themselves enough to reduce him to a murderer. They are all flawed. They always attack when they should wait. Overextend. Put too much weight on the front leg. Turn their backs. Try to use an unmastered weapon like a soulless weapon's going to do all the work *for* them... He is no murderer. He is a teacher. An agent of evolution. They murder themselves. That's what he'll tell the pigs if they ever find him. And if they don't understand? Can't reason? Well, they'll murder themselves as well...

(not cloves; the sound of footsteps)

A heavy but graceful man; must be muscle, not fat. Uneven, bouncy strides. About five foot six. Loose clothing, chains. A heavy indica smell. And the offbeat walk, like a gangsta. Very worthy prey.

(sudden movement – reflexes lock into place like a cartridge)

His pupils dilate. His face drains white. His grip on the katana loosens a little. Shallow breathing becomes relaxed, deep breathing. His eyes see potential sword arcs as pale blue streaks in the air. He notices *everything* move.

The prey walks past the doorway without noticing him. He leaps gracefully from the shadows and lands almost noiselessly behind it. The prey spins on the balls of its feet, a large serrated combat knife already in hand. *No hesitation... impressive.* The prey is a short Latino gangsta with a red bandana and a dark spotty red ring around his throat, as if recently strangled by some sort of thin, knotted rope.

He goes right inside Carne's head and looks through Carne's eyes back at himself, switching entirely to Carne's perspective.

\* \* \*

Carne looks into the swordsman's eyes and sees the void behind them. The glazed, dilated eyes look through him, making him feel about as mutually menacing as two dimensional paper target of a surprised young mother holding a baby. *No point in talking or trying to intimidate him...* Carne knows this look. Every time he has seen it, atrocity has followed. He knows he is about to die, that his death is unavoidable. But if he fights to the threshold of his ability, he may have a chance to take this puta motherfucker down with him. His grip on El Mariachi loosens a little. His muscles relax a little... *Yeah that's right esé, I'm taking you with me, motherfuck.*

The two men stand motionless, each waiting for the other to move.

The void in the white-clad kenshi's eyes starts acting like an undercover pig trying to incite a riot in Carne's biosurvival, defensive and territorial circuits. Fear-frozen, he knows that the moment he moves a muscle, he will lose that muscle. His white-clad attacker holds an oversized katana firmly in a low position at his right hip.

*Show fear and die. Attack first and die. Make a sudden movement and die. Try to run and die. Talk shit and die. If that bitch hadn't knocked me out this puta would be **gutt**ed by now, yo.*

Carne can feel the fear overcoming him. He can do nothing to stop it. He feels his reverse grip on El Mariachi start to slip on the warm, sweaty handle. Fear dominates his will. If he doesn't attack now, he will lose control of the knife, fumble and die. He mentally rehearses the attack, trying to assess whether or not he can jab out and twist quickly enough to take him down. He cautiously shifts his weight to his back leg as he notices the katana shifting synchronously with him. *Fuck.*

Carne loses his patience and screams, "fuck you, you fuckin' Ku Klux Kenshi putaaaaaaAAAA!" On 'putaaaaaaAAAA,' he lunges forward at the white swordsman with a backhand-diagonal swing aimed at the carotid, which has already moved well out of the blade's death trajectory. *Ah, shit.*

\* \* \*

*Return back to center; what the hell am I doing? Whoa... that's the longest I've ever done tha...*

The Man in White is shaken out of Carne's perspective by the pierce of his scream, realizes what's going on, and lets his body step gracefully to the side. Drawing the katana hilt-upwards, its blade intercepts the attack at the wrist, sliding deep into the meat of the inner wrist, severing a tendon necessary to grip the ka-bar, and opening WIDE a high-pressure stream of precious heartwine - causing the hand to go limp and the blade to splash harmlessly into a bloodpuddle in the concrete. In one fluid motion, he arcs the sword around, now standing alongside the attacker, and lops the injured hand clean off as the remainder is recoiled in shock. With this downward attack, he squats on his haunches, perceiving the passage of time in slow detail. The prey is now shocked and harmless, too stunned to attack, and ready for judgement.

From his haunches, he quickly stretches upwards into a tall standing offensive cut, cutting deep into the floating ribs, and diagonally up towards the spine. The prey lurches forward and vomits blood from a ghostly face, eyes rolling backwards. *The death masque.*

He raises his sword high and even with his eyes, waiting for the prey to stand. Zanshin.

Carne does try to stand.

With the detached precision of a high speed sewing machine needle, the oiled steel plunges directly into the center of his solar plexus, retracts just as quickly, then punctures the trachea in an identical manner and angle.

His prey is a collapsing fountain of gore.

Blood is everywhere. His intellect slowly awakens and resumes command as he wipes the katana on the carcass' left pant leg. He looks around, dazed. He resheaths the blade inside his trenchcoat, and begins the long walk back to his wharf-hole. An unfamiliar noise is in his head now. The sound of a man vomiting blood. Soul, meet your new permanent and eternal voice. Sorry.

\* \* \*

Carne felt like a reanimated medical cadaver. He was delirious and freezing, but he still had the street wits to stay dead till the swordsman was gone. *Man, fuck those 47 Ronin puta motherfucks.* He reached into his pocket with the arm that still worked and grabbed a handful of crystal meth railcaps, which he began methodically cracking and snorting. Crack. Snort. Crack. Snort. Crack. Snort. He felt surrogate life begin to course spastically through his ruptured bloodstream. Using a modified power move he once saw at the DMC finals in Ottawa, he managed to get his well-butchered carcass to its feet and begin the world's most painful pimp-limp out to Bey Street to look for help. A river of blood followed behind him. He held his side together with the opposite arm, trying to keep the organs from squishing out while he walked. He was breathing shallow and gagging, trying hard to ignore the foul intestinal smell. The meth, pain and bloodlessness combined were blinding him with ten-second bursts of what looked and felt like staring directly into the sun. He lost his kinesthesia entirely - losing all awareness of his own body. He staggered and splattered in the blinding whiteness. His vision returned briefly, as he saw bright, moving lights and cars, and heard a young woman screaming.

\* \* \*

The best ride in Teedot at the time was Aunt Mary's Taxi Service, an underground, unlicensed, illegal cab line. Words like "maverick" are often dropped, and sometimes, "slapdash" and "racket" as well. Like most large cities' public transportation companies, the TTC came to realize its monopolistic stranglehold, then proceeded to creep the cost of a bus ride up to an outrageous twelve dollars. When quality is outlawed, only the outlaws will boast quality, and thus Aunt Mary's became the cheapest ride in town. Aunt Mary's illegitimacy also afforded her the one novelty that made her unique in America: Japanese sport bikes. Two words: Speed. Sidewalks.

Besides superbikes, Aunt Mary had a slipshod panzer fleet - all smashed up, patched, deglassed, reinforced, kevlar-paneled, and welded together like homemade tanks with riveted iron plates, rhino chasers, roll cages, rams and gastank shielding. Aunt Mary's "boyz" were basically all psychotic cab school dropouts - heavily armed crack addicts and meth heads - many with valid drivers licenses - but criminally dangerous schizophrenic maniacs every last one. They had forged badges of various sizes, shapes, colors and languages, some with spelling errors, others awful forgeries in waterbled Pilot V5 extra fine pens and two-minute photo booth mugshots; laminated with clear tape no less.

Still, ask anyone: best ride in town. No union, no regulations, no litigious accountability and no standardized anything, not even pricing. Cheaper, faster and scarier than anything. Many of Teedot's urban adrenaline junkies, having grown weary of free climbing buildings, playing frogger and base jumping, would "Hail Mary" just for the rush. You could call their dispatcher and have a psychotic on a 1700cc Supersport Frankenstein at your apartment in four minutes flat, get a near death experience tearing



down Yung Street's sidewalks and alleys, nearly killing everyone in your path, and be all the way across town in ten minutes flat for one third the price of a legit cab. Aunt Mary's boyz were also a fantastic source of drugs, underground porn and credit laundering.

Talia hailed Mary in the booth outside her now-abandoned apartment. She had a single duffel bag with her - the Dayna Chapman Bag-o-Stuff - which was to accompany her on her long pilgrimage to a new life at K'an Monastery. The Bag-o-Stuff is a shamanic talisman. It has everything you will ever need... especially when traveling:

Pens; writing books; reading books; candles; incense; lighter; hackysack; coffee & filters; plastic mug; fork; multitool; mini flashlight with red filter; batteries; latex gloves; duct tape; spoon; free speech marker; toilet paper; band-aids; digital camera; caffeine pills; deodorant; toothbrush; toothpaste; dice; cards; glass beads; folding binoculars; tarot cards; string; asbestos mask; condoms; scissors; knife; chocolate; sugar packets; needle & thread; hotel soap; hotel towelette; hip flask full of rye; zip lock bags; silly putty; Lego; walkman; CDs; rollics; fishing line; coat hanger; crayons; gum; aspirin; magnifying glass; firecrackers; cayenne pepper...

She considered trying Howard's apartment door one more time. She'd been seeing things out of the corner of her eye all night, but she could have sworn she saw something moving in there from the street. But he hadn't answered the door. She squatted down and rummaged through the Bag-o-Stuff for the binoculars. As her fingers found the familiar rubberized cylinders, a yellow tank-truck of a car pulled up with smouldering tires and belching mufflers.

She climbed into the heavily armored yellow El Camino, waving her ROAM tag at the sensor and waiting for the *ping* and the green light... [*"no ROAM, stay home...*

*company policy.*”] She complimented the driver on his speed. “Wow. Four minutes. Nice.” No reply.

The driver had a face alright. It looked like someone once tried to flatten it with a breaching ram. He had a conversational demeanor that reminded Talia of Tom Waits in concert. The green light went on and went *ping*. He finally spoke. "So where do you think you're going?"

"Bus station, ugly." Zero to ninety in the two seconds it took to say "bus station, ugly." Carbon gases, burning tire fumes, barbasol stench and highspeed ragas blasted out over a ramadan-bullhorn of a radio.

The man barked his words like a carny chainsmoker over the racket. "Gettin' the fuck out of this goddamn rathole, yeah? Good for you. Smartest thing you ever done, shit. You're not comin' back are ya?"

"No."

"Smartest fucking thing you ever done," he growled.

"Thanks."

“Don’t mention it.” He made awkward cowering tortoises of the slower-moving green and brown licensed cabs; slaloming parking meters and soft targets ‘twixt bike lane, bus lane and sidewalk. People saw Aunt Mary coming and got the bloody hell out of the way; diving into the safety of a riotproof dollar store or a concrete-bulwarked coffeehouse. The absolutely unstoppable yellow El Camino juggernaut would **not** be reckoned with by pedestrian, fruit stand, traffic light, detour, or even a street-preaching lunatic's big gay sandwich board; warning: "*The wages of sin is death!*" **BAM!** Splintered, airborne, pseudo-religious jigsaw puzzle.

*Fuck 'em.* "Hey butchy, you know what happens to rats when you make 'em live in a cage with the same population density as Teedot?"

"Nope." *Butchy? That's new. Is it my attitude, maybe?*

"They all go fucking crazy and eat each other. They all kill each other for no reason other than feeling far too fucking crowded. Some of 'em go hide in a corner and get fat and do nothing till they die. Some of 'em clean and groom themselves to death. But I shit you not, most of 'em just kill the hell out of each other. It's great, innit?!" He reached under his seat, disappearing from view. The Camino veered headlong into a huge plaster mascot of a penguin in waiter garb. He came back up with a warm bottle of day-old road piss; regaining control of his tactical death taxi. Sighting an easy target, he suddenly veered at a wealthy-looking pedestrian and whipped the urine-frag hard at the man's distinguished face, careening past and cackling himself into a choking fit when he heard it connect and explode behind him.

"Hm."

"Shit, I missed Bey Street." Squealing and burnt oil. Voices screaming bloody murder in the distance. Aggro Urb-Pacs shield-banging and stomp-marching in the distance. Black smoldering rubber. 1.8G centripetal force. Angry honking like dogs barking. Distant squealing. Doppler-effect sirens everywhere. Yelling, collisions and popping windshields.

Her driver was now rocking out to Serbian genocide hymns on AM1444. As they made their approach to Bey Street, Talia felt the overwhelming presence of the Man in White. *The man from my nightmares. What the --.* Her heart felt tight and evil, slowly seizing, just as it did in her dreams when she approached him. She felt something awful,

terrible inside her, but she didn't even have the language to adequately define it to herself. *Ew, it feels sorta like my first ever bite of fresh durian is clotting in my veins.*

Overwhelmed, she begged the driver to "Stop, stop, stop!"

The driver suddenly growled out a stream of obscenities as a heavy, bloody thud actually cracked the El Camino's reinforced blast shield. Eighty to zero in the three seconds it took him to yell out, "Jesus shit-worshipping skullfucking hitlerchrist!"

Carne's last thought before the thinking parts of his neural anatomy flew apart was, roughly translated to English: *OK, so I kinda fucked this one up. ... but I fucked it up oldschool, yo.*

Talia grabbed her Bag-o-Stuff and got out. She turned slowly and marveled to see Carne Asada lying in two tenderized, bloody chunks on Bey Street, with assorted red chowder. She had a morbid intuition... *The Man in White did this, somehow.*

She collapsed on the sidewalk, preparing to safely faint or vomit. *No, get up. Get up, Talia. You can handle this. Get up. Go. Run. Run!* She gripped Keikan-Koroken with white-knuckled fists and invoked all of the energy it could give. It overpowered her immediately. A white-red blast of ancient death energy was conjured in her hara and catalyzed by her warrior-spirit, rupturing out of her constricted chest and fists and expanding outwards in all directions like a candystriped gas explosion, saturating everything in a quarter-mile radius in the sudden force of ten-thousand successful attacks. Wim emerged from the alleyway just in time to witness the Bald Girl using his *own* mythical technique to permanently burn an image of herself in his retinas. And everyone

else's. Surging with energy ten times more aggro than PCP, She sprinted six blocks to the bus station far and away from Wim and the unpaid cab driver, who was lying incapacitated in the middle of Fronting Street next to the half of Carne that still had part of a face.

Shocked, awed and blinded by Talia, Wim the Angry Puzzle just sat his ass down on the sidewalk and worked aloud on a love poem until some moving white blurs with voices eventually came towards him and took him to a bright, confined place. All he could see was the Bald Girl. All he could feel was love. "He" was composed of myriad individualized components that were all seemingly at cooperative war with each other. He understood none of this, least of all himself.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Nyn drew the little metallic curtains, cut all connectivity and started an initial scan for stealth hooks. *Clean*. He tweaked the gamma and contrast on his display to foil any neo-TEMPEST attempts at emission capture, then cautiously and quickly entered an encrypted and personal journal entry about his final meeting with Tritia the night she had to do *that unspeakable thing* he knew she had to do. It wasn't exactly ethical. Maybe it was the shit they put in those drinks reacting badly with the hash he'd absently eaten that night, but as he remembered the details, his memories seemed more like dreams than anything real. Something was off. *Really off*. He typed quickly and suspiciously, half expecting his shadow employers to be monitoring his every eye direction and keyword-triggered flutter.

*Tritia. Named after some elemental abomination with a short half-life, I think. Beautiful name for a true redhead. She had a SUI JURIS tattoo on her ass, got it back in Berkeley when we were stitching coincidental deaths together. You wouldn't even know she was dangerous until she had your weapon arm folded behind your back like a ten cent wing. And still, with your humerus ready to suddenly interject marrow and angular calcium into your bloodstream, you'd drink in the jasmine and amber nitric ester fairies of her neck and breast; the vanilla, dark roast coffee and fresh baked bread and tumeric lingering on her fingers, breath and lips; the sandalwood, patchouli, liquor and pussy she routinely rubs into those fat, ratty carrots*

*growing from her head; you'll savor the ocean salt humidity of Tritia's lush and pheremone-rich aphrodisiac girlsweat and you, my unfortunate, doomed friend, will wish more than anything in the world that you'd made a better impression. Believe me, I know. At one point, all shoptalk aside, she turns to me and asks, "Hey, Nyn, if a genie ever offers you three wishes blablabla" and I cut her off and explain to her that me ever being offered an unlimited wish is provably impossible. She doesn't believe me, so I swear on my own life right there and then that if I am ever offered an unlimited wish, I will use that wish to return to the very moment of the oath and deposit a gold coin in my hand. Surprise, surprise, when I hold out my hand, it's empty. It always is. I get the feeling she secretly hates me for being so logical about her pop psych questions. Maybe I hit a nerve with the wish thing... she IS retiring, and not one of us – no Nod fedayeen I've ever met - has **any** idea whether ours in an afterlife of heaven, hell or annihilation. Would you jump off Alamut's highest parapet on the Old Man's promise you might fly? Either way... I'm going to miss her.*

*Nyn out.*

After testing for stealth hooks again, he one-time pad encrypted the entry; then wiped the original with twenty passes; then stripped the encrypted file of its extension and of all identifying plaintext; then used steganography to slip it into some empty space in a lame adult contemporary retrospective ogg file; stuck it in with the rest of his cheesy music and updated the playlist; then he wiped his swapfile, file slacks, freespace, flash memory, ram and caches; and then, of course, the ritual reboot for no other purpose than

digital superstition. He quarantined the passphrase in a secure area of in his mind which he believed immune to all known information extraction methods.

\* \* \*

About fifteen minutes after he swallowed all the cute little blue beads he'd named S6(P32-36) and "the replacement;" S1(P1), the ultimate thought entered Howard's consciousness.

Myelin sheathing was literally melting and dripping from his axons. Dendrites were growing like high speed weeds and vines, strangling some receptor sites and permanently attaching to others mouth-to-mouth. Disobedient little iodine molecules were building up illegal negative charges, causing rapid-fire action potentials, forcing Howard to collapse into forty second seizures that were all flashes of intrusive white and red light and strange audiotape-rewinding noises born in the center of his brain and violently kicking outwards. In the space between the seizure that made him bite his tongue in half and the seizure that broke his back, the ultimate thought occurred.

*I'm about to die. Here. Now.*

A million action potentials all simultaneously told Howard's musculature to arch his back. The muscles cooperated, leaving one hell of a brain teaser behind for the coroner. Howard would be found folded backwards in half the next morning... the top of his head wedged awkwardly between his ass cheeks. Howard's contorted corpse was locked in his apartment from the inside with no signs of exit or entry. Cause of death: Howard apparently fell at terminal velocity onto a conspicuously absent steel handrail - inside his apartment - while his brain generated tiny pockets of bleach, chlorine dioxide, and sodium chlorite at over four thousand receptor sites. Fat evil square chemicals were



forced through tight, innocent, round reuptake ports, where MAOIs, expecting a different chemical entirely, routinely broke them down into NaOH, ClO<sub>2</sub> and other nasty chemicals, proceeding to bathe all his violated and weeping receptor sites in caustic death and burn ball-bearing-sized holes in his brain like Swiss head cheese. Severed tongue, yet minimal blood loss due to rock hard carotid arteries full of plastic blue blood. The blood in the mouth, eyes and nostrils was also found to be a morbid blue wax.

Carne had ripped him off. Or, so he thought. In fact, Carne's side of the deal had been more or less legit.

\* \* \*

After looting and burning Trin's store, and beating and torturing poor Trin for a good twenty minutes, Carne and his Latinos forcibly appropriated the pill, *no longer half-empty*, from the cash register's change tray. They tried rubber hose cryptography on Trin's safe, (that is, they tried to beat his passphrase out of him with a proverbial rubber hose,) but it became quickly obvious to all cholos present that this was never going to happen. Trin's resolve came from neither fierce internal integrity nor suicidal greed. No, in Trin's mind, the ultimate, saccharine-ironic vengeance was already neatly prepackaged within the offense. Tritia's gift to Talia wasn't free. Her rare object for Trin, in exchange for the sword, was nine hundred micrograms of ioleuketamol oxynicotine... Nod's patented chemical problem-solving agent. Nicknamed ThanatO<sub>2</sub>, Nod's 'dirty uncle' was theoretically nonexistent, and therefore impossible to acquire without a Nod budget code, which also did not exist. Trin had already replaced the LPMT in the stray capsule with ThanatO<sub>2</sub>, and, just as he was about to plant it back into the puzzle cube, Carne and his homies showed up with fire and guitar music and bouncing cars and razors. Trin was

smiling on the inside throughout his sloppy, highly unprofessional torture, knowing exactly what would happen to his tormentor when he swallowed it. The rest of the poison he had stashed in his safe would still make it into capsules, into the cube, into Nyn's luggage, and ultimately into the bloodstream of Matsubara Industries' Daimyo; Rinzai. The great Asano, who Trin had imitated on the phone right in front of Nyn, and who was Trin's only major competitor in black market katana trade, would be accused of hiring Nod to assassinate Rinzai. Believing the role himself, Nyn would only be travelling to Tokyo under the double-blind *guise* of a Yakuza trainer... only Trin knew that Nyn was to function as the sort of messenger you're supposed to neatly kill upon receipt of the message... all in the vested interests of healthy competition. Rinzai would be poisoned, Nyn would be swiftly and brutally executed, probably with damascus cleavers, and Asano would be blamed for capital-E-Everything. The ferocious demon would descend upon Trin's competitor with cold, detached retribution. Nyn was supposed to get carved up like field game without ever understanding what happened. Capitalism was Trin's one true religion. A client once refused him an autographed copy of Atlas Shrugged on the grounds that he might actually masturbate to it.

\* \* \*

Howard trumpeted a loud nasal snicker and altogether stopped being Howard. The very last thought in his mind was an idea that can never be expressed as coded language; can never be put into words, or math, or even music.

\* \* \*

*Game Over. Please play again.*

\* \* \*

So, you play again.

This time, you're going to try playing a class of character with which no one has ever gotten very far. You're going to play god, literally. More accurately, you're going to play as a human *incarnation* of god, on Earth. The last player to try this, a rather attractive young female, got a popular god character to a vested *all-time* record of age **thirty-two** before getting nailed to some wood by the government. She'd been so successful cultivating this human-incarnated god character that, even at the age of thirty-two, she'd single-handedly managed to permanently alter the rule systems, cultures, architecture, and even the Gestalt structure of the game. The game was thus recalled to its realtime devteams immediately. The cryptocoders allowed the changes to stay, since too many other players, yourself included, had already invested hundreds of game-years and savegames based on the new fundamentals of this player-orchestrated hybrid reality. But of course, then they raised the difficulty of playing god tremendously; they created realtime government agendas that were much more competitive for the throne of God than those once flexed by the Romans. The average lifespan of a reincarnated god on earth was reduced down to about four years after the key evidence finally burned down with Rome and suitable archeological disinformation was disseminated; humanity invented networked information and its intelligence agencies started applying it properly. Governments and nongovernments got extremely skillful at turning budding new cult leaders into either evil villains or motivational speakers. Shut up and profit, or get scandalized in the press and firebombed by the ATF. Or, perhaps the Devil Herself taps

you on the shoulder one day and she slides something into your neck and whispers only, “Shall we call you Hubbard or Koresh?”

The game has serious limits; even while playing as god. The one thing which the psy-clouder prevents you from knowing is that there is a higher level of *you* who is just playing a game. Oh, it will let you *suspect* such ideas, but you will never, ever be sure of them and you will never, ever prove them. So, even playing as god, you don’t exactly get to be omniscient. The game’s dilemma engines deal with this paradox very simply: you are only a human incarnation of god in exactly the same way any other character you might play is just a human incarnation of you, and does not possess the same knowledge and power as you... you are the limited avatar of an infinite being.

In a seemingly insignificant chain created by the millions and millions of times you’ve played this game before, each new character becomes conscious less than a nanosecond of game time after the previous one disengages from consciousness and you put another token in and start over. Consciousness in this game is not unlike a mental space suit; limiting and awkward, but necessary to protect you from unintentionally hostile overstimulation by the elements.

That being said, you still have a hell of a lot more advantage, power, wisdom, and knowledge playing as god. For example, any regular human character has a zero-radius sphere of influence while still in utero. Without consciousness, which could take months to realize, you don’t get to play yet. Your vehicle isn’t ready yet.

But an incarnated god gets to be conscious the moment his fetus is playing with a full deck of chakra. Six months into your nine-month term, the you’re already bored with

manipulating cosmic trajectories from the womb... crashing distant suns into each other and whatnot.

But then you discovered that gratifying and disastrous pastime. The SETI program. There are vast arrays of absolutely massive radio dishes in many of the empty spaces in North America. These dishes listen passively to outer space and millions of home personal computers then analyze this data in search of intelligent patterns. A surface nuclear explosion happens on some distant sun, causing radiation patterns that fly outwards in all directions. Some of that radiation hits a dish in California four million years later and somebody's home PC hears a little crackle, dismissing it as a remote solar flare.

Your captivating new game is delivering cryptic messages to SETI's scientists by causing suns to oscillate your communiques in simple binary code, four million years in the past. Exquisitely controlled, perfectly timed explosions at one-second intervals.

A bored god is inevitably a cruel prankster at some point in his or her maturation process.

You send messages, in ENGLISH, no less, such as:

*YOUR GEOMETRY IS COMPLETELY BACKWARDS.*

...and:

*I RETURN TO EARTH TWO THOUSAND TWENTY FIVE*

*YEARS AFTER MY DEATH. IF I SEE ANY FORM OF*

*CURRENCY, ALL WILL DIE SCREAMING.*

...and deliberately incomplete messages, such as:

*THE SEAL OF SOLOMON CAN BE USED TO DECRYPT*

*THE WORDS OF NOSTRADAMUS. SIMPLY BEGIN*

*WITH...*

But, like every good prankster, you want recognition. Peoples betta reckonize! You want people to look upon the strange fruits of your ego with awe and slackjawed befuddlement. So you throw them a line, giving them the longitude, latitude and date of Your impending miracle birth. You expect nothing less than a fantastic birthday, complete with shit-flinging media circus, suicidal zealots and tactical Vatican intervention.

Nothing of the sort actually happens. Nod's neural networks discovered the first message, *YOUR GEOMETRY IS COMPLETELY BACKWARDS*, before it was decoded by SETI's distributed network. Nod agents curtly infiltrated Berkeley's labs within the half-hour, assuming irrefutable ownership of the channel over which the messages were being broadcast. No one but Nod ever heard any of your messages. Date, time and location were all they needed to deduce the rest. They matched their holy DNA database against the maternity blood test databanks of Teedot's hospitals.

\* \* \*

One hour and forty-three minutes after the Seal of Solomon message was received, Tritia was crouched in the bowels of St. Michael's Hospital surrounded by

sticky brown laundry. Hospital laundry is some of the nastiest shit a girl can hide in, tending to be soaked in every imaginable human fluid, from bloody mucus to gangrenous pus.

“Nice fucking retirement job,” she muttered dizzily to herself, “I always thought number thirteen would be all glamorous and cinematic. This sucks.” There was something seriously wrong with her head. Something ineffable. Something that was making her question her training, her career, her values, *everything*. She automatically popped a hash coin into her mouth and chewed, reflexively trying to return to center... *Get my permachill on. Get my permachill on. Get my permachill on...*

The hospital staff was feeling it too. Over three hundred wackjob cases in emergency all claiming to be gods, or Satans, or pure sentient energy. There was some unofficial warning circulating as a wild rumor not to drink tap water.

On your way out of the womb, your Hail Mary Moment of Truth, you’re snatched up by a suspicious-looking nurse with fat orange dreadlocks, carried underarm next to that luscious melon of a sportsbra-tethered left breast and skirted silently down a convoluted maze of black steel stairs and strange-smelling sterilized hallways. Suddenly, you stop crying, because your mouth, throat, face and entire body are encased in rapidly cooling liquid plastic.

...just like t.s. eliot always said,

*not with a bang, but a whimper.*



\* \* \*

*Game over. Please play again.*

\* \* \*

A chemically overclocked meat fist trying to punch its way out of a riotglass ribcage. Tritia was *all* adrenaline-squirt. She had the DNA samples, but the cube wouldn't be solid for another five minutes, and half the hospital staff was running amok trying to find her plastic kidnapped bundle of Jesus, and screaming all dramatic-like. Hospital security was terrifying shit compared to the po-po. Hospital security had medical weaponry. Syringe darts. Nausea cannons. Biofeedback shortguns. Plus, anyone they arrested, once convicted, lost their *human* status and became sole property of the medical community (a.k.a. torture-monkeys.) If she got caught, they would shave her head, tattoo the sole of her right foot, and reduce her lifespan to about ten excruciating years: a life of intravenous poisons, painful bloodwork, experimental chemotherapy, carcinogenic blue dyes and bubbly green rashes.

With an unstable pinky, she punched a thirty-two-character passphrase on her IP-cell. She PGP-encrypted an urgent message to Nod's dispatcher, giving her status and location, and a request for a *fire* truck instead of a garbage truck. And then she pulled the fire alarm.

Something was wrong. She felt like she massively overdosed on laced hash or something. It was hard to focus on anything because everything was so... incredibly detailed... and complex... and... **significant**. Irrationalities would manifest and slowly self-rationalize themselves through pirated channels of her intellect. Trees and traffic shifted and buckled, as if swaying underwater. Everything roiled, even steel-and-glass skyscrapers and pavement. And her own hands. *Oh shit. This isn't hash.*

Staring intensely at her hands, she stumbled backwards into a well-spoken lunatic of a man who was ranting to a local news anchor. She balked at the uncanny similarity to Dennis Hopper.

“I choose a religion that, while fitting into that-which-I-am, when its principles come into contact with mutually exclusive existing principles of mine, the new ideology doesn't immediately declare war on the whole and start doing irreparable damage. Diplomacy and flexibility, not, not NOT good versus evil. This is my AVATAR, for Howard's sake, not America!” The anchor and the cameraman were giggling and taking turns filming each other, neither paying any attention whatsoever to the ranting Palmer.

Tritia tried to recompose her cognitive awareness and separate real from imagined. But this was impossible. *How many people are having the same problem as... what was I... huh? ... whoa.* The news anchor had revealed himself to be made entirely out of stitched-together moments from televised history, and the cameraman began biomechanically becoming one with his hardware. Everyone in the gathering crowd, impossible to judge numbers in this state, seemed to be having exactly the same problem she was having... the reality around them was unhinging. She saw three naked firemen holding hands. She felt she had been one of them in a previous life. Tidbits of extremely improbable conversations would temporarily coagulate out of the myriad wondrous noises being created by the crowd. None of it made the slightest bit of sense until she unfocused and heard it all as a chorus of self-mourning slaves. Every time she chose a direction, it would be blocked by someone or something which would take the form of the very opposite of whatever she was expecting. Every time she tried to return her consciousness to center, it would get pulled apart by mutually exclusive dilemmas. The

weirdest part was, everyone else out here standing around her looked exactly just as fucked as she was.

Trying for what felt like an eternity to announce the overturning of a landmark court Case on TV, Erroll Finch, the anchor on the street for MetroTV, had stolen the keys to City News' "News Rover" and was doing mad donuts on the top level of the hospital parking garage, trying to psych himself to jump the ramp and land on the roof across the street... finally getting his lines right out there in the sanctity of his flying rover...

"Tonight, the Palmers versus Hendrickson Case was overturned by a twelve to nothing vote on the basis that nearly all hallucinogens have been proven by scientific rigor to possess successful self-evolution potential... Leaders threaten crackdowns and martial law..."

Finch's report hit a brick wall at that point.

Strangers were having conversations about *a priori knowledge* with each other. *Firemen everywhere. Why so many fucking firemen? Oh right. Hospital. On fire. Alarm. Right. Oh shit!* Tritia checked the hockey bag to make sure the hastily embalmed messiah was still in there, and yet undamaged. It was fine. She looked directly into its bewildered open eyes, once yours, and the distinct feeling that **everything is a voluntary illusion** frostily crept up the hairs along her spine.

## Chapter Zero

To what extent can an inorganic system fool an organic system?

Consider the relational dynamics between player and character in a hypothetical 1<sup>st</sup> person total immersion VR: Neither player nor character is aware of the existence of the other. While a character is simply a vehicle in which a player's ego can play, a character is sentient, and fiercely believes itself to be playerless. A character does not demonstrate free will when played, although it is absolutely convinced that it acts of its own volition.

A player *acts* a character... *incarnates* as a character.

To what extent is the character the real you? To what extent is the player the real you?

Can a character communicate with its player? Does a character possess enough sovereign individuality to generate a message independent of its player? Assuming yes, then if a character wrote a simple message to its player on a sign, mirror-backwards, and then stared at itself holding the sign up in the mirror for several hours, might it get the idea across to its player? How would the player

experience this message?

Above all, why would a player attempt to talk to himself in such a convoluted fashion?

What methods, what techniques, what states of awareness will help a sentient character to recognize the illusion, to see through the veil, to awaken the player?

Think about it. Figure it out.

Although you may one day wake up and realize you are enslaved by some system of hard determinism, you must do everything you can to approximate randomness, art, creativity and unpredictability within that system.

If you are controlled by a player, it is your **survival responsibility** to be as interesting, talented, unique, unpredictable and "3<sup>rd</sup>-party entertaining" as possible. You must keep the game interesting, since a player's boredom inevitably leads to their character's suicide.

*-from the Censored and publicly burned Palmers of Light pamphlet, "Virtual Ego."*

Talia browsed absently through the copy of Virtual Ego she'd just been handed by a ragamuffin lunatic of a girl with Howard's face - wincing bewildered back at her - from the surface of the girl's greasy T-shirt. She didn't really understand what the pamphlet was getting at, so she crumpled it and tossed it absently to the ground. Still surging with adrenaline, astonishment and ancient death energy, she walked Pirusan Airport's loop of shops, cafes and wickets like a madwoman. Tonight, she was in a dark, lonely mood, so her walkman was belting out boygerms music. (Like in grade school: Ew. Don't touch me. You've got boygerms. Ew.) Rag Rage was an incredibly talented group of four riot grrls who all sported shaven heads, facial scars and red warrior caste boots just like her. The lead vocalist, Malatesta Emasculata, was wailing out a gut-wrenching, diaphragm-ripping cover of Chemical Castration's "Once There Was a Little Girl" practically right against Talia's eardrums. Talia was very, very into it. Sure, lots of music moved her emotionally. But Rag Rage always moved her politically, which felt powerful, autonomous and righteous.

She had an hour to kill before boarding her plane to Nepal.

*"Once there was a little girl  
Who had a little backwards curl  
Right in the middle of her whore*

*And then one day she met a man  
Who had a plan to take her childhood away  
And that little girl went MOTHERFUCKING TERRORCORE!!"*

"**Feckin' roit!**" she preached; out loud. A large, colorful pack of timid Melanesian tourists scattered and parted around her coming the other way. They left sacred and writhing tribal patterns in their footprints as they passed.

She just walked the loop like a Zen racetrack for about an hour; people-watching and window-shopping. Airports are among the best places to people-watch. Such diversity, and almost all positive energy.

About every ten minutes, she thought she saw Tritia out of the corner of her eye. Tritia, the stalker. Tritia, the rescuer. Tritia, the best sex she ever had. Talia had herself subconsciously convinced that, ten minutes before boarding, Tritia was going to run up to her from out of nowhere (*she always came out of nowhere and disappeared back into nowhere when she left ...*) and wrap her arms around her and kiss her neck and beg her to take her along to Nepal. And then Talia would remind herself that this is Teedot, and not fucking Hollywood.

\* \* \*

In reality, Tritia was clutching a heavy hockey bag, standing out in the rain next to a large crowd of ranting and schizotypal Palmers of Light, and playing "One of These Things is Not Like the Others" with all the ominous breathing red firetrucks. One of them had to be agency, but they all looked so completely wrong.

Traffic, both organic and vehicular, would shift dramatically between patterns of order and chaos. She stumbled through the maddening crowd, witnessing impossible miracles everywhere. Suddenly, three out of every ten people would be wearing the same



shirt... not a sudden change, but a few would leave, a few would arrive, and then it would be five out of every eleven, plus all the cars at the surrounding stoplights would be blue sedans. Then nothing but yellow trucks, lanky caucasian males in gray hoodies and short, blonde, chubby females in black-rimmed glasses and business suits. Competing newspapers had identical headlines and pictures. License plates lined up in obvious serial sequences at stop signs. The random shouting in the background was down to about three different stock phrases in two predictably generic voices... and then it would gradually scatter and diversify, slowly back to normal. And THEN, it would gradually hypernormalize; now the randomness of her environment had grown too perfect somehow... everything looked counterfeit; too-evenly spaced; plastic.

*Firemen, Tritia! Look for firemen!* With the exception of the three naked dancing ones, most firemen look like a lot like cops, but without the asshole-sowl that you tend to develop with years of pushing around the weak. *It's odd*, she thought, *firemen and cops perform such similar social functions, and yet most people generally like firemen and hate cops. Why?* She was off on one of those mind-clouding tangents that they warned her about in Nod school. She got her head together, spotting a burly fireman sporting the famous cop sowl. *Nod*.

"Come with me, ma'am."

As she was very firmly escorted to the truck, she overheard a Palmer of Light being interviewed by a reporter. *Why does every Palmer of Light remind me of Dennis Hopper in that classic film... uh, ... Apocalypse Now?*

“Nah, nah, man. I’m not a ‘drug fiend.’ You can’t use language like that if you have any desire at all to understand us. We’re, we’re like, neural hackers. Yeah. We use entheogenic plants to hack our own minds, and we know how to do it properly, right? Your average ‘drug fiend’ is nothing but a recreational motherfucker who burns his own circuitry. And honestly, man, I hear what you’re saying, I really do, but I couldn’t give a fuckity-fuck about the most *practical* or *plausible* or *realistic* religion, as you put it. What the hell sense does that make? Shit. Everybody knows that modern science would kick the guts out of every faith since primitive animism if that were your only benchmark. Listen, man, I follow the most interesting, unique, original, and above all, rewarding religion I can find, not the most... the most uh, *pragmatic*. That’s stupid! End of freakin’ interview.”

She climbed into the cab of the firetruck and two unsmily men dressed as paramedics curtly took her duffel bag. Other agents in the distance were talking to each other and scowling at her. She read their lips and made out three words, “she’s definitely hallucinating.”

“Where are the DNA samples, Tyt?”

She handed them two small rattling vials of liquid, trying desperately to keep it together. *This is... this is... a dream, maybe?* The “paramedics” disappeared behind the truck, and twenty seconds later, the truck was emitting a loud, deep alien drone.

*Processing.*

The man on her left, the driver, was a sideshow strongman from the twenties. He had the big bald head, the chiseled chin, muscular face, the well-waxed and curled-up handlebar ‘stache, and even the permanent “*wipe that grin off your face, mister*” grin. He

turned to her and actually managed to make his memorized speech sound sincere and original. He even had a voice to match the look.

"Tyt, Nod would like to commend you for your years of loyalty and highly professional service. Your personal contribution to the agenda has been of the highest possible quality. When you wake up, you..."

Discomfited by such reckless mention of her much-loathed assassin name, Tritia's attention derailed for a moment while she paused to gnash her teeth. All of these men looked morbidly sober... nothing like the circus freaks outside. "What? When I wake up? What the..." (*was that real... or did I just dream that?*)

"...will find a set of directions up your sleeve. These directions are **false**. Hidden within *that* information - you know the drill – [here, his smile curled grinchy and sinister-] will be your final orders. These orders may involve extra equipment, which will be on your person as well. Follow the directions exactly, and you will find the lock that fits your key."

"Wait. What do you mean, when I wake up? Hang on a sec..." Everything went wobbly-reflective, and then entirely too narcotic for her to look at directly.

...whuaaaaaaaaaa...

Dreams have no beginning; no end.

Two hundred CCs good old liquid Valium made friends with Tritia's circulatory system. Unbearably overstimulating reality slowed down and faded out around her. A white-masked man came out from behind the truck with a second, murky red syringe. With a cold latex hand, he injected the opaque red mystery syrup into her neck and she finally lost awareness.

\* \* \*

Five minutes to boarding and still no Tritia. Fuck it. Talia went through the metal detector, got frisked, waited while they deciphered the complexity of the Bag-O-Stuff's X-ray, and boarded.

*Well, she thought, its just like Elizabethan times. You fuck up your one chance at true love, you go be a nun, and it's all good. I'm a natural-born orphan anyway.*

*Intrepid. About to become the deadliest warrior this planet's ever seen.*

She took her window seat, where she was going to be practically immobile for the next eleven hours. She was fulfilling a lifelong dream, and could hardly even fathom the concept. Her entire life had been all about taking the *safe* choice rather than the *free* one. Now, at the point where it was impossible to reverse her decision, her heart was about to burst with the pure rush of being human. Feeling tears of exhilaration starting to well up behind her eyes and tighten her throat a little, she settled her ass into the seat for a good two minutes, let her eyes fall shut, exhaled slowly, and smiled.

She sipped her airline-issue ice water, which was stealthily laced with 1700-or-so-micrograms LSD-25. So did her pilot. *What a great game this is*, she beamed.

\* \* \*

The remains of Wim Nightscales were found in a locked isolation room of the newly renamed *Teedot Bedlam for Those Not With The Program*. Very little of Wim actually remained, since he exploded. Although no shrapnel, burn marks, non-organic materials or residue chemicals could be found in the room, the end result would be very

similar to Wim having swallowed several pounds of plastic explosive ... no chunk of viscera nor bone too big for a shotglass remained. Every surface in the room was caked in Wim's flesh and blood, except for his pillow, which had a black envelope on it; neither of which were so much as touched by a drop of gore. There were no footprints on the bloody floor, and no unusual noises had been reported the previous evening after lights out. Dumbfounded, the police filled out a bomb report and blamed it on some spiritual activists. The envelope contained Wim's suicide note; written in what turned out to be squid ink:

*a spider was trapped in an hourglass  
inside the Bulb of Dreams  
he tried to stand on the shifting sand  
of consciousness, that poured in streams  
into the Waking Bulb below  
where everything is what it seems*

*the spider spun a patterned web  
above the draining sand  
and when the Waking Bulb was full  
in dreams did he still stand  
remaining in unconscious bliss  
exactly as he'd planned*

*but when the hourglass was turned  
and waking drained into dreaming  
his wily web became a trap  
beneath the sand that was streaming  
and when the Bulb of Dreams was full*

*the spider had died screaming*

\* \* \*

Nyn found himself in Tokyo, in a tiny white capsule with a mattress and a television; one chamber in a grand hive of identical capsules stacked hexagonally twelve high and twenty wide. He was supposed to stay in the little white coffin overnight, and tomorrow he would wait to be contacted by some guy named *Ken-something* in the morning, meet up and give the guy some weird executive toy Trin had personally gift-wrapped... a techno-industrial Rubik's cube or something, as a gesture from Trin. Apparently that part was mission critical.

Nyn hated Tokyo the very minute he got off the plane. He had heard it was crowded, but he assumed that it would be Teedot-crowded, not soccer-riot-in-Dublin-during-the-World-Cup-crowded. Taking a shit or being in a coffin were practically the only two times when someone wasn't touching him. Being in the subway system felt like being a single red cell injected into the blood-doped arteries of a marathon runner. In fact, the entire vibe of the city forced a feeling of "must accomplish immediately" on everyone... *Must get to subway. Must get on subway. Must find hotel.* This feeling arose almost entirely out of how difficult it was to **move** anywhere. Getting to the subway involves getting out of someone's way ten thousand times in ten minutes, for example. So anything involving relocation becomes a short-term imperative goal.

Nyn was out of his element and hating every second of it. He had no idea how this city worked; its exceedingly complex and variable possibilities were rapidly

overwhelming his isometric apperception of the whole. Paranoid and exhausted, he turned off the small glowing globe in his coffin and pulled the thin white sheet over himself. Fifteen minutes later, Nyn was once again lost to State of Mind #3. With a little meditation and a lot of focus, he could slip into it naturally. Tonight, on the other hand, he had a lot of help: thirty-six hours of airport-induced sleep-deprivation, eighty milligrams of pharmaceutical-grade ephedrine, and two large black Ethiopian coffees with espresso shots. Adrenal system overclocked. Dopamine reuptake effectively blocked. Serotonin reserves bled dry, and all of this simulating a euphoric schizophrenia.

State of Mind #3 is a very pleasurable state of hyper-alertness and fearlessness. The scalp and neck feel mildly electrified. You can talk shit confidently to anyone, even if you're socially retarded, and you can often philosophize circles around them. You are smarter, quicker, stronger, more observant; your reflexes are faster, and your senses are hyper-receptive. You crave intellectual stimulation, sensory overload, and orgasm. You could give a fuck what any man, woman or government thinks about you.

Nyn grinned confidently, melting himself into the sterile white plastic mattress and mentally repeating Dr. John Lily's mantra:

*I am not the biocomputer  
I am not the program  
I am not the programming  
I am not the programmer  
I am not the programmed*

*I am not the biocomputer  
I am not the program  
I am not the programming  
I am not the programmer  
I am not the programmed...*

And he soared higher into State of Mind #3. Hours later, he drifted off into a completely refreshing sleep. Tomorrow afternoon, he will kill three corporate samurai enforcers with Carne's baseball bat, José Canseco. Shortly afterwards, with a ribcage full of throwing knives and shards of reflective black glass bathing him in orange Tokyo sunset fragments, noticing his fractured skull and that urgent gravity problem, he will fall screaming to his death seventy five stories straight down into a polished black marble plaza floor, immediately followed by a series of pops and a giant rectangular 1800-pound sheet of clear 125,000-sledgehammer-blows-grade safetyglass. Nyn will go out like a microscope slide, thinking sarcastically, *what a great game*.

\* \* \*

An extremely disturbed CNN newscaster appeared on live television that evening. He did not blink. At all. His mouth hung open in seeming amazement at everything. He delivered his broadcast with a faltering, uncertain tone of voice, constantly stopping in mid-sentence to stare wildly off-camera, or to readjust his posture, or to play with the elasticity of his face. Strangely enough, most of the viewers who actually saw the broadcast understood it perfectly...

*Tonight, an American cult named the Palmers of Light have contacted the press and informed us that they have introduced several hundred teralitres of the hallucinogen LSD-25 into the water supplies of every major metropolitan city in America. The Palmers of Light claim that the American government has acted in malicious conspiracy against*



*their religion by assassinating the resurrection of their messiah at St. Michael's Hospital in Teedot this evening, and also by assassinating their living messiah, Howard Glass, in his Teedot apartment this evening. Two messiahs in one night, I guess. We are still unclear on the details of the St Michael's incident, but Teedot police have confirmed that a man named Howard Glass was found dead in his apartment tonight with a broken back, although cause of death has yet to be determined. Holy shit. That's a bad thought. Oh man. That's awful. I gotta stop thinking about that. Oh shit... I'm still on TV. Um... Oh yeah. We at CNN urge you to remain calm, and to consume only sealed, bottled water. This drug is not fatal, even in high doses, uh, such as the dose you may already have ingested. Please remain at home for the next twelve hours, lie down in bed, and allow the drug to pass harmlessly through your system. Um, what does that say? It keeps moving... I can't read it, and it's all purple. Oh. We "assure" you that no matter how upsetting the situation may seem, whatever you are experiencing is only temporary, and everything will be fine in ten to twelve hours if you will just lie down and relax. Do not drive anywhere. Dave, I'm really fucked up here... I can't do this. I have to lie down...*

The Palmers of Light were **going** to have their ontological apocalypse; Messiah or no Messiah.

\* \* \*

Tritia's awareness faded into an entirely unfamiliar environment. She was in the cargo hold of an oil tanker. She tried to look around, but her eyes wouldn't focus and her head wouldn't clear enough to process information. She gave up and passed out again.

*Fucking valium.* She drifted in and out of consciousness for a few hours before finally sitting up and looking around. She was wearing a black Nod-issue neoprene wetsuit and a GPS wristwatch. The key was still there. Around her neck, zipped underneath the wetsuit. Tucked into her sleeve was a plain almond business card with two paragraphs of fine print: directions to a Devil Clown in Suriname. In broken English. *Obviously not the real directions, but there would certainly be one or two Bloody Fist eating a whole lot of Surinamese Devil Clown for the next two weeks, just in case the directions are intercepted.* After a short round of cryptanalysis, out came an extremely simple message:

*7°30'22" / 16°24'11" - jump ship and wait. Use your key atop a tall rock.*

Her heart converted blood to crude. *That's fucking INSANE! I must have decrypted it wrong. It must decrypt a different way, and if it's decrypted wrong, maybe the interceptor throws himself into the ocean and drowns. Wait... I have a GPS, don't I?* She found and checked it. She was moving... slowly but surely... in a direct line to those coordinates. She had about forty-five minutes to jump ship, and she didn't even know how to get on deck or what strangers she might run into in the process. She spent twenty of those minutes frantically performing alternate decryptions, all of which came out gibberish. Well actually, one said, "I'll miss you, beautiful." *Yeah, Nod could get pretty creepy sometimes.*

She closed her eyes, took three deep breaths, and focused.

*Just do it, Tritia, c'mon... just fucking get up and GO and let's do this thing  
NOW. GO. GO! GO!!*

She felt the threshold of her free will crack at that moment and pushed herself onward, despite her most deeply-engrained survival rationality. Invisibly making her way up through the ship's Spartan metal architecture, Tritia skulked up a rusted green gridiron staircase, climbed past thick scalding hot steampipes, and finally opened a heavy metal door to a blinding bright balcony overlooking the featureless Pacific. She emerged into the warmth and calming sunlight of the aft main deck. No gulls. No hazy greyish speck of land, nor rock, in any direction. She was trying hard to suppress her fear and panic with blind faith in Nod, and in a fantastical corporate-sponsored retirement. Beast vs. Will.

***This is it, Tritia: Are you a human being, or are you corporate bioproperty?***

Shaking, detached, psychotic and trying to quickly rationalize the irrational, the Nod conditioning in her fought its way to the apex of her priorities, and Tritia let herself fall ten stories into the abyss of the South Pacific.

*...where everything is what it seems...*

A thick neoprene Nod-issue hydrosuit is superior to a standard life jacket as far as buoyancy while unconscious in warm salt water is concerned. If the wearer relaxes all of

her muscles, as is often the case when knocked unconscious from a hundred-foot fall into the ocean, the hydrosuit will enable her to float at breast level until she regains consciousness and starts really feeling that torn rotator cuff..

Tritia woke up a short while later. *Ow fuck my elbow.* There was no land, no ship, no “tall rocks,” nothing. *Fuck.*

*...There had better be a fucking helicopter on the horizon in the next hour or I'm going to be fucking pissed. Pissed!*

Six hours later and still floating in an utterly featureless drink, she was deliriously singing children's songs. Not even another ship. *Ships usually follow specific traderoutes. ...above the draining...above the draining sa- ... the draining sa-...the draining sa- ... above the dr-...*

*...I am so fucked. I am so fucked...*

She wondered what the key around her neck might unlock, or whether it was just an Agency prop to help convince her Will to jump ship and die. If so, it was really Nyn's idea that killed her... he made tricks like that standard procedure. *...Waking bulb, waking bulb, into the waking bulb...* She tried to remember his face when she pulled out her key at cocktails that night... it really didn't seem like he knew that it didn't unlock anything. He didn't seem like he knew she was just going to die out here...

*waking bulb? What's a waking bulb? Where the fuck is that from?*

Her faith in a Nod-run fantasy retirement island of some kind was literally all Tritia had left, so she clung to it; letting her dreams run uncensored and wild...

The sun fell. Dusk dug its inky claws into Tritia's sanity, dragging it down all red and bloody across a shimmering wet horizon. She was freezing cold, hungry, tired, and utterly convinced that she was about to die. *Here, now*. The wrist on her injured arm suddenly itched, then went tingly. She felt herself... *changing*... somehow...

*That second red needle...*

As consciousness fluffed up full of dreamy halcyonarcotic cottonballs, her last intelligible thought was: "...*remaining in unconscious bliss...*"

Awake, and naked, and alone. Denatured by some recent and mysterious intemperance; left with literally nothing but a searing chemical hangover. Nauseous and prostrate atop a hundred foot igneous erection protruding from the South Pacific. Surrounded by a flat infinity of water, except for one hazy grayish speck on the horizon. Trying in vain to reconstruct some fractured rhyme or folk song or poem, repeating that one line over and over and over in the mind obsessively... something about a spider trapped in an hourglass.

...you already know how this ends

## ABCs for the New Renaissance

**A** is for Attack Dose – an immoderate but still safe dose of psychoactive plants or chemicals deemed sufficient to make a strong, significant impact on the mind. Some substances require one or more attack doses before their true potential is unlocked to their user.

**B** is for Bushido – The ancient Samurai Code of Honor. Noted for its fanatic loyalty and morbid nihilism.

**C** is for Charas – Hashish collected and pressed by manually fondling female cannabis flowers, collecting the resin on the hands, and rolling it into balls. Noted for its production by both Nepalese monks and hot young virgins.

**D** is for Determinism – The belief that reality is a causal chain reaction which cannot be influenced by individual choice or free will. Therefore, the longest domino chain conceivable started with the Big Bang and resulted in you picking up this book, and nothing had anything whatsoever to do with your personal preferences or values. Even the underwear you might be wearing has been preselected for you by the Big Bang.

**E** is for Entheogen – A plant or compound used for shamanic, spiritual, religious or otherwise sacramental purposes; generally to “awaken the spirit within.” In modern application, “Entheogen” is a politically correct codeword among independent internal research scientists for “organic psychedelic drugs.”

**F** is for Fedayeen – “*Men of Sacrifice*.” A zealously loyal soldier so skilfully indoctrinated by his leaders that he’s willing to happily and enthusiastically carry out suicide missions in their name.

**G** is for Gestalt – “A physical, biological, psychological, or symbolic configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts.” (*dictionary.com*’s definition)

**H** is for Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle – “The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa.” (Heisenberg) ... this led to another idea that one cannot observe any phenomenon without altering its natural course in the process... a metaphysical landmark of a statement.

**I** is for Iaijutsu – Draw-cutting. To draw the sword, kill the opponent, fling the gore off the blade and resheath the blade in a single, fluid, relaxed motion.

**J** is for Jeet Kune Do – Don’t think of JKD as a martial art or strive to become a Jeet Kune Do master; all you need to do is fully grasp one of its core principles, and then you become a rapidly self-evolving virus. The principle: Absorb what is useful; reject what is

useless. Therefore, don't aim to become a judo master or a champion kickboxer or a respected aikido sempai or the embodiment of kung fu... just aim to learn and steal all their useful and effective techniques into a hybrid martial art of your own design. Same goes for cooking, art, etc...

**K** is for Kaishaku – The second player in seppuku. You disembowel yourself with your tanto, and then your kaishaku uses your own sword to take your head off and finish you.

**L** is for Lesbian – A woman with good taste.

**M** is for Manrikigusari – An arm's length of chain with geometric weights attached to the ends... easily manufactured from chain and padlocks or ratchet heads; excellent for a wide variety of applications including throwing, entanglement, grappling and strangulation.

**N** is for Ninjutsu – Invisibility methods and techniques.

**O** is for Orgasm – It's always okay to have an orgasm. Anyone who claims otherwise is probably your enemy.

**P** is for Prohibition – The covertly profitable criminalization of anything people enjoy by a government against the will of its electorate and under the pretense of salvation of the humans from their own nature, and/or the salvation of hypothetical children from hypothetical evil. The prohibitive government thus monopolizes the materials, production and underground/international trade of the prohibited goods or services and markets them at a highly inflated price, usually to fund clandestine military / intelligence budgets abroad. Law enforcement and intelligence agents are free to terrorize their competitors with full sanction from the law, and to allow a select few to deal locally at inflated prices for a large cut.

**Q** is for Qat – an Arab / African plant stimulant; chewed or brewed as tea.

**R** is for Riot Grrl – A raging young feminist with a punkish style and attitude.

**S** is for Shamanism – “Use of the archaic techniques of ecstasy that were developed independent of any religious philosophy - the empirically validated, experientially operable techniques that produce ecstasy. Ecstasy is the contemplation of wholeness.” (Terence McKenna)

**T** is for Temper – Samurai blades are differentially cooled using clay and water to make the cutting portion of the blade much more rigid (sharpenable) than its spine, which must remain flexible. This tempering process leaves a signature *temper line* which is classified by experts into one of many aesthetic categories such as “cloves,” “waves,” “clouds,” etc.

**U** is for Underground – the unrestricted, unregistered, unlicensed and therefore necessarily flourishing, rewarding and diverse cultures of those who refuse to



compromise their artistic, spiritual or personal integrity for money, and must therefore answer their calling in secret, impoverished, hungry, makeshift and pretty much unrecognized.

**V** is for Victory – over that ‘sell out your soul or starve’ bullshit.

**W** is for Wakizashi – A Samurai short sword... a short katana.

**X** is for Xenophobia – A fear of those foreign to oneself. Which eventually turns out to be everybody.

**Y** is for Yakuza – A syndicate of Japanese mafia organizations, or a member of one.

**Z** is for Zarathustra – The main character of Friedrich Nietzsche’s book, Also Sprach Zarathustra, which could change your life.

## Shoutouts

First and foremost shoutouts go to **you**, the reader, who, just by buying this book, have helped me taste the sweet fruits of an otherwise fluorescent-lit and socially hostile corporate hell. Also, much love to whoever the *miracle worker* was who somehow got this thing in front of a real live publisher.

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Steve “Maverick” J - DANCE, Muthafucka!!  
Barrymore’s Tiff – Best. Dancer. Ever.  
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Mom, Dad, Ryan, Granny, Tattoo and Bodhi.  
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### 514 Massive:

Valerie “Ralph” G – The most compassionate, understanding and friendly girl on earth.  
Capoeira Bondage Fairy Tiff – Keep in touch.

### West Coast Massive:

Dayna “Earth Mama” C – sticking *her* neck out for *your* planet, **daily**.  
Keith “Mearcstapa” H – The Infamous Married Magus himself.  
Shiraz “Bill” A – Renaissance man and capitaliste bastardiste extraordinaire.  
Nancy “Lucy” L – A truly amazing, multidimensional and evolved individual.  
Jason “Dionysian” R – Master hedonist and modern antihero. The genius meat of legends.

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Corey “Monkey” Duncan – who fell off a cliff in the dark, but who went out happy, free, and living a life most of us **wish** was even *possible* to pull off.  
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Keith’s mum, Sylvia – who always used to tell me, “Don’t get arrested!” and who no doubt went to a better place, alphebatized it, ergonomically corrected it and doubled its work efficiency.